The House That Jack Built

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/21330526.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Hannibal (TV)
Relationship:	Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter
Characters:	Will Graham, Hannibal Lecter, Abigail Hobbs, Jack Crawford, Alana Bloom, Tobias Budge, Will Graham's Dogs
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, season one AU, Murder Husbands, Murder Family, Manipulation, Hallucinations, Canon-Typical Violence, Murder Husbands Big Bang
Language:	English
Collections:	MHBB2019
Stats:	Published: 2019-11-12 Words: 37,027 Chapters: 9/9

The House That Jack Built

by TiggyMalvern

Summary

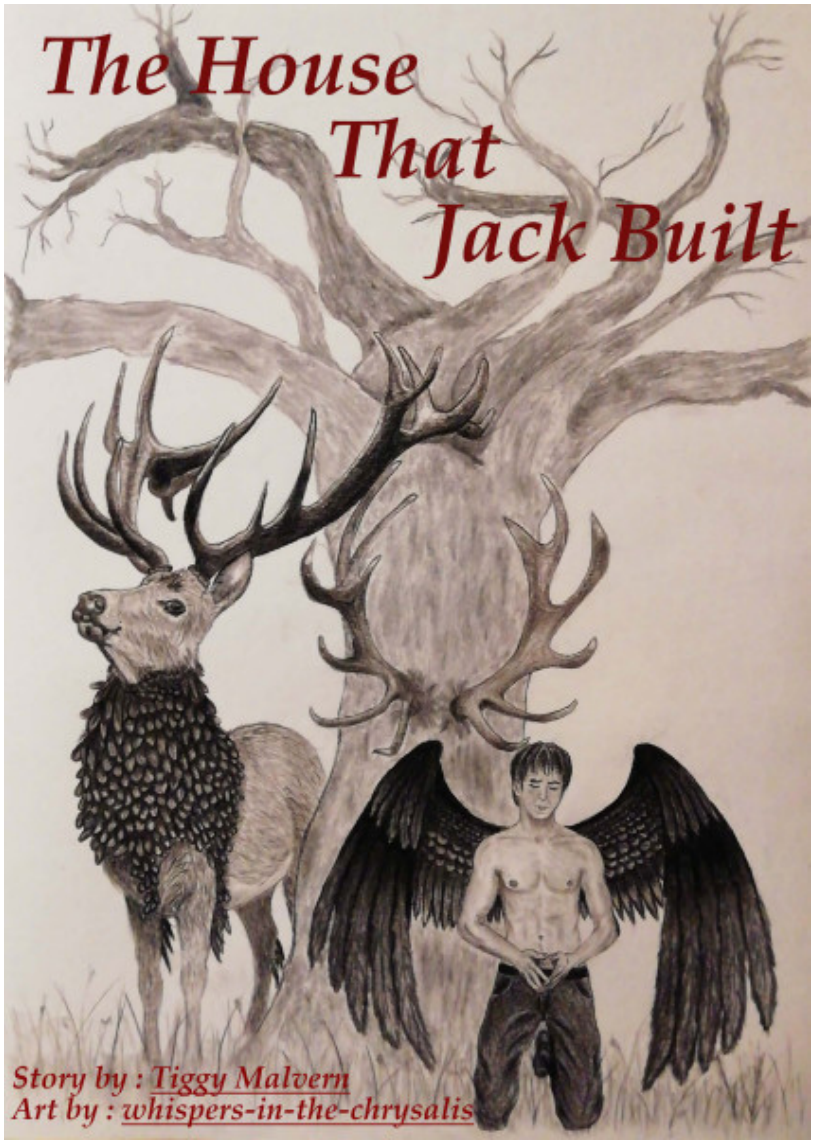
What if Jack Crawford kept his promise to Alana? What if, when Will says he can't do this any more, Jack lets him go back to teaching? A season one AU in which Will spends more time forging a real relationship with Abigail. And of course Hannibal's spending more time with Abigail too…

Notes

Thank you to the organisers of the Murder Husbands Big Bang for putting their time and effort into arranging this event. Thank you to DreamerInSilico for once again offering their invaluable beta services to make this story better.
And of course HUGE thanks to the delightful artist whispers-in-the-chrysalis, who was absolutely wonderful to work with through the whole process. She was so enthusiastic about everything, and created even more lovely pieces of artwork for this story than she was supposed to, and all way ahead of the deadline. The fabulous little section dividers were her personal added touch :-)

The direct link to Whispers' art is here. Go and tell her how awesome she is!

Chapter 1



He stops inside the doorway of the barn and takes off his glasses to fully see the body hanging from the rafters.

The smell of blood is heavy over the surrounding straw; the skin is peeled and shaped from the corpse's back to drape beneath the arms as ragged, reddened wings. The face looks serene in death, almost peaceful after the many months of anguish.

Elliot Buddish has stopped fighting the inevitable and become one of his angels.

"It wasn't God, it wasn't man, it was his choice to die," Will says, as much to himself as to Jack. His eyes linger on the picture before him, this vivid demonstration of perfect acceptance.

"His choice?"

"As much as he could make it." The man with no choices choosing to embrace the one that remained.

Will lets out a slow, shuddering breath that steams in the cold air of the barn. “I don’t know how much longer I can be all that useful to you, Jack.”

“You caught three,” Jack reminds him. “The last three we had, you caught.”

“I didn’t catch this one. Elliot Buddish surrendered.” Not to the law. To the future he couldn’t keep denying.

“You know, I’m used to my wife not talking to me. I don’t have to get used to you not talking to me too.” Jack’s already turning to walk away before he’s done with the sentence.

Will’s fingers are twitching at his sides, involuntary, reactive, wanting to reach, to touch, to press. “It’s getting harder and harder to make myself look.”

Jack’s not leaving now; Will has all his attention. “No-one’s asking you to look alone.”

“But I am looking alone. And you know what looking at this does.” He can hear the desperation sneaking into his voice, unattractive and weak, and maybe that’s what will make Jack understand.

“I know what happens if you don’t look, and so do you,” Jack says quietly.

Will closes his eyes, a quick shake of his head, but the images are still there inside. They always are. “I can make myself look, but the thinking is… shutting down.”

Jack stares at him, really stares through long, aching seconds, then sucks in a breath and shoves his hands deeper into the pockets of his coat. “Maybe you’re right. Maybe you should take a break from this for a while. Take as long as you think you need.”

“That’s it?” Will blinks, off guard. He’d had his next line all ready to go. “You’re okay with it?”

“I’ll recommend giving you a medical leave from field work. Go back to lecturing for a few months.” Will stares, locked in silent consternation and Jack’s face is hardening into a glare again. “Well, don’t look so surprised, you asked for a rest, I’m giving you one.”

Will pokes at the straw with one shoe, somehow feeling thirteen again like he’s messed up in front of his dad. “I thought you’d fight me harder on it.”

“You’re a major asset to the team, Will, you have a real talent for the work. But when I took you out of your classroom, I made a promise to Doctor Bloom to cover you on this.” Jack twists his lips, a glimpse of his rare humour. “I don’t want her mad at me, I hear she can be a fiery one.”

Will glances at him sideways with a quick smile. “I wouldn’t want her mad at me either.”

“When you feel you can come back, let me know. I’ll always have a place for you in my unit,” Jack says, and the warmth in his voice is real against Will’s skin, a spreading layer of insulation against the chill of the air.

Jack heads out back to the car, leaving Will alone in the barn.

Or not alone. Elliot Buddish is still here.

Will turns back for one last look, and Buddish is *there, right there, he’s not dead, he’s alive and standing and shuffling closer –*

His hand goes to his gun, but Buddish is falling to his knees, too weak to be a threat, and Will doesn't draw. "I see what you are." Buddish whispers the words, his hands almost clasped in front of him, the savage, blood-painted image of an angel before the Lord.

"What do you see?" Will's words are just as quiet, sucked out of him with his breath. There's an answer he doesn't want, but maybe he needs to hear.

"Inside. I can bring it out of you." Soft like a promise, a holy oath.

"Not all the way out." Not now, not when he's making the changes to stop it. Buddish had only one choice, but Will has more.

Buddish bows his head in a wracking cough, raises his eyes in one last supreme effort. "I can give you the majesty of your becoming."

He collapses into the straw, and when Will blinks and then looks again, he's gone. He's dead, dead as he always was, still hanging from his own rafters on deftly knotted ropes.

Will swallows and shivers, gathering himself before he goes back to the car, and to Jack.

His scheduled appointment with Doctor Lecter is that same evening, and it's the obvious place to start.

Will seats himself carefully against the leather of the chair, wary of the squeaks that reverberate through the cavern of the office. "You'll be glad to hear I'm following your recommendations for my psychological health, Doctor. Today was my last day of interpreting dead bodies."

"I heard on the local news that the FBI located your angel maker." Doctor Lecter tilts his head barely a centimetre to the right, the strangely bird-like mannerism he so often demonstrates. "You weren't involved in his demise?"

"He did it for himself before his disease or the law could do it for him," Will says dryly. "I won't be dealing with any more after the paperwork's done on this one."

The doctor's eyes on him are curious, incisive. "Are you ending your association with the BSU?"

"I'll still be lecturing," Will says, "but I won't be working any active crime scenes."

"How did Jack take this revelation when you informed him?"

"Surprisingly well. I thought I'd have to fight him on it, but he relented quicker than I would've guessed." Jack thinks it's temporary right now, a mental sabbatical. He might have a different battle

on his hands once Jack figures out he's never going back, but he can deal with that a few months down the line.

"I would have concurred with your assessment. I'm pleased for your sake that Jack has proven us both wrong." Doctor Lecter doesn't sound pleased. There's a chill creeping beneath his professional tone and his fingers are tense on the wool of his suit over his knee, fabric crinkling around each pad. "Will you continue to attend your weekly sessions now that your obligation to do so is terminated?"

The doctor's not *quite* looking at him, staring past his ear at the stripes of the curtains behind his head. His focus on Will is normally so sharp, unavoidable and indelible, that its absence now is almost palpable, a phantom touch gone from his skin.

There's a void around the doctor's form, a sucking space that pulls air and substance from the rest of the room, but everything drawn into it simply evaporates and radiates away, a black hole that can't ever be filled.

Doctor Lecter would miss him if he didn't come back.

He'd miss him.

Will settles deeper against the leather of the chair and inclines his head just an inch. "I believe you would tell me that while it's clearly advantageous to avoid potential triggers for new traumas, the issues that are already present won't simply disappear," he says into the tingling silence.

The void snaps closed and the doctor's eyes are back with his own, his mouth softening into a gentle curve. "It can be a challenge, attempting therapy with a man who is both so astute and well versed in the field, but you are of course correct." The slightest of pauses, a hesitation so unfamiliar from this man, and his fingers tap once across his knee. "I'm delighted that your progress today won't interfere with the progression of our friendship."

Friend. That word again.

Doctor Lecter had used it at the hotel, the day after they met, and Will had cut it away with a precision blade. It's back again now, weeks later, when the doctor is too familiar with his oddities and neuroses and his asocial mannerisms for it to be real.

Except somehow it is.

And Will would miss him too.

It's an odd epiphany to have about a psychiatrist, and in particular this rather stiff, fastidious man who pokes sharply and unerringly through Will's defences. Yet those tiny, precise holes he leaves don't grate like most people with their ill-defined scrabbling. Doctor Lecter doesn't drag nails over Will's skin with socially-mandated falsehoods and clumsy attempts to set him at ease, and his finely controlled mannerisms don't ooze unwanted personal information with every breath.

He's easy to be around. Almost comfortable.

Will doesn't acknowledge the announcement of friendship, but he doesn't deny it.

The doctor leans forward in his chair, less space between them and a softness around his eyes. “I’m hoping to have Abigail over for dinner at my house tomorrow evening. Perhaps you’d like to join us?” His lips thin into a quick, self-deprecating smile. “Alana is reluctant to let me release her from the hospital alone following my previous faux pas.”

Abigail. He hasn’t seen enough of her – he’s been kind of shying away, with all the weirdness going on inside his head.

“A faux pas? I’ve only ever heard tell of your impeccable manners, Doctor.” The tease comes instantly, naturally, and for a moment Will wonders if he’s gone too far, if the atmosphere of china teacups and mongooses isn’t appropriate for this office.

It’s okay, though, with the doctor’s lips stretching wider. “It would seem Alana has been kind enough not to spread word of my disgrace.”

Will wonders briefly if he should be concerned for Abigail, but it’s impossible with Doctor Lecter so relaxed, his dry humour seeping through his stillness. “What did you do that was so terrible?”

“I signed Abigail out of the hospital to bring her home without informing Alana. It was within my authority, but it was impolite of me not to ask her therapist for her input.”

“I’m told Doctor Bloom can be fiery,” Will says, with a quick, fleeting smile of his own.

“My first-hand experience would lead me to concur.” The doctor’s tone is amused, conspiratorial, and Will’s lost the oppressive sense of sitting in a psychiatrist’s chair. “I believe she would look upon it more favourably if you were also in attendance.”

“I’d like to have dinner with you, thank you,” he says, and the warmth he feels isn’t only an echo of Doctor Lecter’s, it’s a glow inside himself.

The doctor’s house fits him. It’s obviously too large for one person, allowing for his entertaining, without being excessive to the point of bombast. It stands solid and imposing over the street, but the colours of the brick and tile are homely and inviting.

Will raises his hand and presses the doorbell.

Doctor Lecter is clothed in one of the same immaculate suit, waistcoat and tie combinations he wears to the office, and Will’s feeling significantly underdressed by the time the door’s fully open. He finds himself hoping Abigail’s opted for something more casual.

“Normally I would’ve brought a bottle of wine, but with Abigail here I wasn’t sure it would be appropriate, so...” Will spreads his arms to present his empty hands.

“Your company is more than sufficient for both of us, Will,” he assures him, stepping aside to let Will enter. “Dinner will be a few more moments. Come and join us in the kitchen.”

Will follows him along the dimly lit hallway to the back of the house. He wonders what dinner’s going to entail, but he expects Doctor Lecter hasn’t planned anything too unusual for tonight. He doubts the Hobbs household was known for its adventurous cooking style.

The kitchen is in sharp contrast to what he’s already seen, sleek and modern with lots of gleaming, metallic surfaces. “Hi, Abigail.” Will’s relieved to see she’s wearing a fairly plain sweater and skirt with thick stockings – the flashiest thing about her is the brightly patterned chiffon scarf wound around her neck. “I see Doctor Lecter’s working on your skills as a chef.”

Abigail turns away from the pan on the stove-top to throw a small, shy smile over her shoulder. “He’s trusting me to stir the sauce, that’s all.”

Doctor Lecter steps up behind her to peer at the contents. “And you’re doing admirably well at it. Another few minutes and the mushrooms should be softened.” He reaches for a tray cooling on the counter-top, pausing before he opens the foil. “The meat will be ready to carve now. Perhaps you two can take your seats in the dining room while I plate.” He leans in closer to Will, announcing in a stage whisper, “I’d hate to miss out on the drama of presenting the meal properly.”

Abigail sets aside her stirring spoon and gives Will a quick grin. “I guess that’s both of us saved from helping out then.”

She seems to know where she’s going, so Will follows her through to the dining room. The table’s laid out with lavish decorations, bowls of exotic fruit and (somewhat bizarrely) animal skulls, with the tallest candles he’s ever seen, all illuminated by the flickering light of a real fire in the hearth. It’s a curious mixture of comfortable elegance and the macabre, and Will wonders if it’s some Lithuanian cultural legacy he’s unaware of.

Abigail sees him looking and flashes another of her small smiles. “Hannibal says nobody should be too conventional, it quashes the spirit of creativity. It keeps things more interesting when you add an element of eccentricity.”

Will hears the words echo in the doctor’s clipped, European baritone, and he dips his head and smiles back. “Some people can get away with being visibly eccentric. The rest of us would seem like freaks.”

“It’s not just me then,” Abigail says, pulling out a chair.

“Definitely not just you.” He doesn’t have many visitors, but the few who come inside stare at all the dogs and the unorthodox furniture arrangements like they’re in a psychiatric facility. He can only imagine the reactions if he added dead animals to the décor.

There are three place settings laid out, and he takes the one opposite Abigail, leaving the head of the table for their host. He pours a glass of orange juice for each of them from the carafe. “Does Doctor Lecter invite you here often?”

“Not as often as I’d like.” She swirls the juice around in her glass before she takes a sip. “This is only the second time. The hospital has all kinds of rules.”

“A well-defined structure can be helpful for people whose lives have been unstable,” Will says. A little variety stops it from being stifling, but Abigail needs stability, when everything she’s known has been ripped away. “Everybody wants to protect you right now, and they’d rather protect you a bit too much than not do enough.”

“Protecting me feels a lot like ignoring me,” she says flatly. “They all ask questions about how I feel and what I want, but why bother when nobody listens to the answers?”

“People are listening,” he assures her. “People care, Abigail. Legally you’re a minor and that means officially right now you’re in the care of the state. Any decisions made with you involve paperwork and they all have to get signed off by people in maybe three different departments. Changing anything is going to take time.”

“I’ll be eighteen in four months,” she tells him, and he smiles at her.

“Then in four months you’ll be able to make things happen a lot faster.”

There are footsteps from the hallway, and Doctor Lecter walks in with plates balanced lightly up his arm. “Bacon-wrapped venison tenderloin in a garlic cream sauce,” he announces as he sets the plates before them.

“It’s a velouté base with cream, mushrooms and green onions,” Abigail adds.

“Precisely,” he says, taking his own seat at the table. “I’m delighted to find you such an attentive student.”

Will looks down at the circles of meat layered across his plate, swimming in rich, thick sauce, then back between Doctor Lecter and Abigail. Venison was a risky choice, a meat that Abigail would intimately associate with her father. The strongest connection would be with the good aspects of her father, though, the man who spent time with his daughter, teaching her about nature and the woods and how to shoot.

Abigail’s picking up her silverware and carving into the loin steaks; she doesn’t seem disturbed in any way, still smiling at the compliment, her body relaxed and movements unhurried.

Hannibal predicted her well.

Will gets to work on his own plate, the knife sinking easily through the tender meat. “Speaking of being a good student, have you given any more thought to college? Are you going to ask them to defer your applications for next year?”

Abigail shakes her head as she swallows. “I don’t even know if I can afford to go. I have to wait and figure things out with the house and the lawsuits.” She dips her eyes, sets down her fork to tuck a stray strand of hair back behind her ear. “Apply to some different colleges, maybe.”

Colleges where there hadn’t been any Minnesota Shrike murders, Will reads instantly. “An out of state education would be great,” he says. “You should travel and live in different places when you’re young. Once you’ve got a job and a house, it gets harder to uproot yourself.” Not too young and not too many places, he reflects dryly. That leaves its own set of issues, but for Abigail getting away from her father’s hunting grounds would be ideal.

“I’ll have a word with Doctor Bloom,” Hannibal says. “I’m sure we can provide a tutor for you at the hospital, perhaps arrange for you to continue your coursework so you can graduate on schedule. Keep all your options available.”

“Can you?” Abigail’s instantly more animated, eyes lifting and brightening. “It would give me something to do instead of sitting around all day thinking about Marissa, while everyone tries to make me talk.”

“You’re not finding your time at Port Haven supportive?” Will asks.

“I don’t like being there. Nobody there understands me, they only say they do.” She’s staring up at him, fierce and certain, then she turns that same gaze on Hannibal instead. “Can’t I have you as my psychiatrist? It’s better with you; I can be honest, say how I really feel.”

“I’ve never specialised in the area of child trauma, Abigail,” Hannibal says gently. “Doctor Bloom is better qualified to be your therapist.”

“She’s nice enough when she’s around.” Her hand goes to the fabric wrapped around her throat and hovers there. “She gave me this scarf. But she tells me I have to go to the group sessions. All of them. There’s like three a day.”

“What makes them difficult for you?” Will asks, with a glance over at Hannibal. “Maybe we can work through it with you.”

“Everybody else is there because something awful happened to them,” Abigail says. “I’m the only girl who’s there because I might’ve done something bad.”

Hannibal reaches over and wraps his fingers over her hand, still clasped tightly around her fork. “You’re strong enough that you don’t wish to see yourself as a victim, Abigail, and that strength will serve you well, but you haven’t done anything wrong. You can’t be held responsible for your father’s actions.”

“Can’t I?” She’s almost glaring now, her eyes wide and muscles tense in her cheek. “They don’t let me watch the news there, but I know what people are saying. That I’m like my dad. That I helped him. Even the police are thinking it.”

Will and Hannibal exchange a look, and he knows they’re both thinking of Jack. “Who told you that?”

“Nobody had to, not really. And Freddie didn’t deny it when I asked.”

Will can feel his expression sour at the mention of Freddie Lounds, and a glance at Hannibal shows him the same. “Freddie Lounds sees her own fortune in this book she wants to write, as well as yours,” he says. “She’s hardly an unbiased source.”

Abigail shakes her head. “I see it, the way they look at me. Not all of them, but some of them. Most of them.”

“The hospital has the advantage that it’s secure, Abigail. They’ll keep the press away from you, more effectively than anywhere else,” Hannibal says. His mouth thins slightly before he speaks again. “Unless of course you choose to invite them inside.”

His distaste is seeping through, a dimpled flaw in the surface of the perfect psychiatrist, and Will throws him a warning glance; Abigail needs support, not more criticism of her choices, valid though it is.

He turns back to Abigail, leans in with his elbows on the table and softens his voice the way he would with a distressed dog. “We know it’s not perfect, but it’s the best option we have for you right now. We’ll make the time to see more of you, spend more evenings with you.” The ‘we’ somehow sticks between the first sentence and the next, and he’s suddenly, acutely aware he’s making promises on someone else’s behalf, but when he looks over to Hannibal, he finds his expression warm and approving.

“We’ll always be here for you, Abigail, in any way you need us,” Hannibal tells her, and Will doesn’t mind being included in that at all.

He dreams of the dinner that night; Hannibal, Abigail and himself seated at the table, set with candles and the staring skulls of birds and rats. Will helps himself to the delicious food before him, chewing on the tender meat, feeling the juices seep and run beneath his tongue.

He looks up from his plate to compliment Hannibal on his cooking, but Hannibal’s skin is blackened, stretched taut and leathery over his bones, and above his head tower a pair of heavy, branching antlers.

Will hears the scrape of fork on china and turns to Abigail to see if she’s noticed anything amiss. He watches as Abigail transforms before his eyes, her fair, freckled complexion darkening and hardening, and she continues to eat, uncaring of the change, her hair coiling upwards into her own rack of tines.

And then Will sees his own reflection in the sparkling clarity of his water glass – distorted by the crystal’s curvature, but he’s unmistakably a match, black and gaunt and crowned in the likeness of Herne.

He startles awake, blinking in the dim illumination of the bedside clock, the numbers taking shape and meaning before his eyes.

The dream was… curious in its oddity, but he hadn’t found it frightening.

It wasn’t a nightmare, but he’s covered in a heavy sheen of sweat all the same.

Chapter 2

He'd thought maybe – hoped maybe – that Hannibal would call him over the next few days, but there's nothing.

He goes to see Abigail at the hospital a couple of evenings. He's got more time to spare now he's not chasing down murderers, and he feels better able to help her deal with her issues when he's got less of his own.

She's smart and energetic, demanding her own place in the world, and she sees through anybody's bullshit. She has a manipulative edge, too – Will doesn't miss it when she's trying to play him for sympathy – but after everything she's been through, he's not going to be critical of her survival mechanisms.

He has to admire her tenacity, and he finds he genuinely likes her as Abigail, not just a symbol of his success in killing Hobbs and saving a victim.

He wonders before his second visit if maybe he should call Hannibal, see if he'd be free to come along, but he doesn't. He's under no illusions about the general desirability of his own company, and if Hannibal doesn't want to call him, Will won't put himself in the position of being let down politely.

He goes to see Abigail alone.

Hannibal's subdued in the early minutes of their weekly appointment, low on leading questions and driving comments. The absence of his laser focus is like the ragged hole left by a barb dragged out through Will's skin.

"You seem distracted, Doctor," Will says into another lengthening lull in the conversation. He has a low, nagging headache despite the naproxen, and he could just as well be home with the dogs. "We can always reschedule if there's somewhere else you need to be."

Hannibal visibly pulls himself back into the room, eyes sharp and wholly on Will for the first time since he took his seat. "Forgive me, Will, you are as astute as ever." That slight tilt of the head again, the one that signifies his curiosity, or a prelude to his careful probing. "Jack Crawford called me two days ago and asked if I would be able to provide a psychological profile of a killer."

Will's interest flares brightly, and it's purely his own, not the mirroring of his empathy. "Did you say yes?"

Hannibal gives him a slow nod. “I did.”

“And you’re telling me this, why?” He can think of ten or more reasons Hannibal might avoid the subject, not so many why he’d present it on a platter.

“Working with the BSU, I should be better able to relate to what has been troubling you,” Hannibal says. “I thought it might help you to know that I have some understanding of what you went through.”

Will arches his eyebrows, and the air he huffs out is too bitter to be a laugh. “It doesn’t work that way. If it did, Jack would be my therapist.”

Hannibal lets the silence stretch a moment, studying him, before he asks, “Do you regret your choice to leave field work?”

He shakes his head. “No.” He doesn’t, he really doesn’t, he had to stop while he still could, before too much of it *leaked* between the compartments in his head. He knows that.

“Perhaps then you resent feeling that you’ve been replaced.”

Will’s lip quirks at the corner. “Everybody does on some level, I imagine.”

“It’s natural for us to want to be outstanding in our chosen field. It’s much rarer for it to be true.” Hannibal leans forward in his chair, his elbows resting on his knees. “I’m not attempting to replace you, Will. Your talents place your skill on a level I can never match. I can help Jack a little, add my expertise to his own, but you remain beautifully unique.”

Hannibal’s a therapist, it’s his job to make people feel good about themselves. Will knows that, he understands all Hannibal’s arsenal of professional weapons, but it doesn’t stop the rich flush of warmth that sweeps through him with Hannibal’s approval.

He gets up from his chair and walks over to the window, staring at the raindrops scattered across its surface, golden in the light from the street lamps. “Do you want to talk to me about the case?”

“Do you want to discuss it?”

He looks back over his shoulder at Hannibal, sees him entirely alert and attentive. Watching Will’s every hint of reaction, as Will watches Hannibal’s. “It helped me, talking to you, sharing my ideas and including your insights. It might help you too.”

Hannibal’s fingers tap slowly, once only on the fabric covering his knee. “I’m not sure that would be wise, Will. You left the field because you found the pressures it placed on you too stressful to easily manage.”

There’s a curl at Will’s lips, letting his teeth show briefly between them. “I thought we already established I’m not a fragile piece of china, Doctor.” He strides back to his chair, resting his hands on the back of it as he glares at Hannibal. “I’m still lecturing, still looking at photos and talking about death and murder on a daily basis. A theoretical discussion with you is different from walking into a room with the bodies oozing onto the floor and ruining the carpet.”

Hannibal’s tongue emerges between his lips as he considers; his hands soften a moment later when he makes his choice. “Jack had me examine the crime scene of a patient who killed a nurse at the

Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane."

That's… absolutely not what he was expecting. "If they already know who killed the nurse, why did they need you to make a profile?"

"There's a question as to whether this particular patient may in fact be the Chesapeake Ripper."

Will feels his whole face change, the sudden slack in his jaw, the wrinkles forming along his forehead. "The Chesapeake Ripper?"

"You know the case?"

Will releases his grip on the chair back and wanders over to the pillar. "I've lectured on him," he says. "As much as you can lecture on a killer who was never caught. He's a good case study on why these kinds of murders can be so frustrating to solve."

Hannibal crosses one ankle over the other. "Perhaps he has been caught, under another guise."

It might explain why the Ripper killings stopped. The Ripper himself surely never would. "Who's the patient?"

"Doctor Abel Gideon."

Will tilts his head. "The name's familiar, but I can't place him."

"He murdered his wife and her family on Thanksgiving."

"Crime of passion?" Disappointing, but it explains why Gideon isn't in Will's internal killer files. "Not really my area, and it definitely doesn't fit the Ripper profile."

"He was a surgeon prior to his incarceration," Hannibal says, "and he's unquestionably a psychopath."

That sounds more promising. "It would be ironic if the Ripper's gotten himself caught because he finally broke his M.O."

"Jack is most keen to find out if that's the case."

"Oh, he would be." The Ripper's a stain on Jack's career record, especially given the involvement of his trainee as a victim. "What's your read on it?"

"The crime scene offered conflicting evidence, so I went to see Doctor Gideon in person today."

"You talked to him?"

"Doctor Bloom and I played 'good cop, bad cop' in our respective interviews."

Will huffs, amused at the image of either of his friends as an interrogator. "Were you the good cop or the bad cop?"

"I'm afraid I had to take on the role of the bad cop." Hannibal's expression remains neutral, but there's a distinct flash of humour through his eyes. "Doctor Gideon is far too fond of Alana to want to think badly of her."

Will's mouth twists with the new information. "Jack's personally involved, Alana has an ex-patient with a fixation – sounds messy."

"It holds the potential to be a difficult week," Hannibal concedes.

"So, what did you make of Gideon?"

"I find I harbour doubts about his claim to be the Ripper."

Hannibal sounds confident; Will suspects he's a man with no doubts at all.

He reaches up, takes off his glasses and tucks them into the pocket of his shirt. "Tell me about the crime scene."

"What do you want to know?"

"Everything, every single detail you can remember from what you saw, from what went in the reports."

Hannibal takes a long breath, a quiet moment as he organises his thoughts. "The nurse was impaled with multiple long metal instruments from the medical supplies – drip stands were predominant among them. Most were placed through her torso, two through her upper thighs."

Will closes his eyes and listens as Hannibal weaves the scene with his words, and slowly he begins to see.

Her spine is arched, her body suspended backwards over the instruments of her death, the metal of healing twisted into dual purpose as both her means of torture and her display stand. There's blood on the floor beneath her, but not all of it. There's a lot more pooled elsewhere in the room. This isn't where it started.

There's a medical table across the room, droplets of blood and a smear along the floor…

Stop. Go back.

Begin.

He attacks her from behind, before she has chance to react, to fight, punches her in the throat so she can't call for the guards. He takes her down fast and smooth, gets her on the floor without knocking over the shelves or breaking any of the medical equipment that surrounds them.

He grasps her head tightly, pushes his thumbs deep into the sockets behind her eyes, stretching and crushing her optic nerves. Now she can't see to fight.

There's blood on her face, the front of her uniform, trailing like mucus from a snail as she attempts to crawl away.

There's nowhere for her to go.

He looks for what he needs, grabs the drip stand alongside him and pulls the shaft away from the base. He walks around in front of her, watches her drag herself worm-like along the floor, hands groping and clasping at his ankles in desperation.

She's pathetic. Her existence is meaningless.

He raises the metal high, aims it square, and plunges it deep through her torso, through her chest and her lungs, the crunch of her ribs vibrating up into his hands and the thud of the final impact on the floor –

He pulls himself back, dragging himself free, because it's wrong, it's obviously wrong, he's not who he thinks he is…

Hannibal's watching him from the other chair, close, intent, and Will snaps the words out. "Most of the wounds were inflicted post-mortem?"

"That was the coroner's conclusion, yes."

"It doesn't fit. The Ripper's a sadist, he makes them suffer."

Hannibal sits back into his chair, his hands settling onto the leather. "So Doctor Gideon isn't the Ripper as he claims. He's merely copying the wound patterns."

Will stares at him, sharp with narrowed eyes. "You already knew that."

"I suspected," Hannibal says. "You have confirmed it."

Will tilts his head back against the pillar, eyes up to the ceiling as he sinks inwards. "Why would Gideon claim to be the Chesapeake Ripper if he's not? What does he gain from it?"

"Perhaps it's not Gideon who gains," Hannibal suggests.

"You think someone talked him into it?" It's an intriguing idea.

"It's a possibility. The list of people who have direct contact with him is small, and I believe Jack is checking his correspondents."

"Whoever it is, they shouldn't be hard to find." Will straightens his head and meets Hannibal's eyes. "If Gideon's lying, the real Chesapeake Ripper's going to be pissed. He'll come out of hiding, let the whole world know he's still out there."

"We may soon be living in interesting times," Hannibal agrees. He angles his head, watching, studying. "Are you sure you don't miss the work, Will?"

"No. I don't need that kind of pressure – trying to beat a killer to the next victim, Jack breathing down my neck every second of every day. I don't want that in my life."

"Perhaps not that," Hannibal concedes. "Yet I never see you so animated as when we discuss them. The killers."

Will's mouth twists in half-humour. "The rest of my life's a bit dull in comparison to serial murder, but some of us prefer our lives on the quiet side."

"Many people do, yes." Will doesn't think he's ever heard agreement sound less convincing, and it's a sharp relief when Hannibal's thoughts move back to their previous topic. "You said the Ripper's a sadist. Do you believe that's why he does what he does? To enjoy pain?"

“No, it’s… more complicated than that.” Will shifts his thoughts, sifting the pictures, the scenes, the sense of the Ripper in his head. “He doesn’t care about their suffering, but he doesn’t need it either. He keeps them alive because he needs them to know they’re dying. He needs them to know *why* they’re dying. The suffering is… more like a side effect than a reason.”

“You believe his killings are a form of revenge?”

“Not revenge. That would be easy, that would give him a clear motive. People who kill for revenge get caught,” Will says. “No, the Ripper has reasons, but they’re… small. Something that would seem insignificant, something that would be forgotten, that no witness would ever mention to the police when the death is investigated.”

The lines deepen slightly at the edge of Hannibal’s eyes. “You make him sound almost petty.”

“Maybe his victims would see it that way.” Will’s jaw flexes in the frustration of trying to explain himself, trying to explain the impression the man makes in his thoughts. “He certainly wouldn’t.”

“What would he see it as?” Hannibal’s curiosity is vivid, arcing like a spear tight and precise across the room.

Will closes his eyes, feeling around for the right word. “Housekeeping,” he concludes, and it sits right on his tongue and in his head. “Brushing away the dust and the cobwebs that make his world untidy.”

“So the Ripper is fastidious.” There’s satisfaction curling through the final word; Hannibal approves of the assessment.

“Very. In every aspect of his life, and definitely in his crime scenes. That’s why there’s never any evidence.”

Hannibal inclines his head. “And now we have this meticulous man pitted against our Doctor Abel Gideon.”

Will raises his eyebrows with a quick huff of air. “Doctor Gideon should probably be very glad he’s locked inside the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally insane.”

Will wakes.

The numbers of the clock glow softly at him from the nightstand. The dogs are sprawled over their beds by the hearth, Zoe snoring rhythmically through her narrow air passages. They’re undisturbed.

Something woke him.

He lifts his head to look out the window; it's a breezy night, the clouds scudding across the face of the waxing moon, the grass rippling silver beneath it.

It's a long way to the tree line, but he knows they're out there. The antlered people. They watch him – he can feel it when they do. It's a ripple of sensation through the hairs on his skin, their gaze on him almost like being caressed.

There's a knock at the door, three times, slow, and the wood is cool under his feet when he goes to answer. He opens the door, the breeze whistling through the fence posts of the verandah, and he finds the stag man waiting, eyes black and questioning.

He's Hannibal, and yet somehow more; taller, gaunter and even more imposing, and he stands with the patience of eternity.

Will meets his eyes. He's not cold, and he's not afraid, but a shiver passes through his muscles. Something close to understanding, but held at one remove; more the expectation of knowledge.

The wind tugs at the door, and he steps aside, holding it wider. The stag-Hannibal dips his head, angling his antlers beneath the lintel as he enters. His feet tap across the floorboards, sharp and cloven, visible extremities of his animal self.

The dogs half-rise, noses snuffling with interest, and then they drop back down to the comfort of their beds. His pack find no threat in the man-creature.

Will looks down at his own legs, sees them extending moon-pale below his briefs to his five toes. He'd thought he might find himself blackened and stretched, but there's no need for that change tonight. The stag-Hannibal knows Will as both a man and a monster, and he will tarry with either.

The Hannibal-creature moves to the chair in the corner, flexes his joints and sinks slowly into its shape. The softness of the cushions take him and absorb him, and he becomes part of the furnishings. He is striking, unique; he will always draw the eye, but as a piece of the house now, a centrepiece of belonging.

The digits of the clock blink and change. It's two-twenty-one, the depths of the night, and Will's too tired for reflection. He returns to his bed, draws the covers up over himself and lowers his head to the pillow.

The stag-man watches over him from the chair, and Will feels the touch of his gaze along his skin through the blanket.

He expects to lie awake, insomnia his uninvited companion at the best of times, but he drifts straight into sleep.

Hannibal calls a few days later and invites him to dinner that evening. Will assumes Abigail's going to be there, but when he mentions her, Hannibal tells him that this time it will just be the two of them.

Will feels a jolt, a spark, for just a single moment, before he realises Hannibal wants to talk some more about Gideon and the Ripper. Their weekly appointment isn't for another three days, and Hannibal isn't the type to phone and start making demands of someone without offering something in return for their time. In this case, a good meal.

It's easy to agree. It's not like he has anything else scheduled.

And yeah, maybe he's getting a bit restless with just his classes to teach, and the mental stimulation will do him good. Something juicy to really sink his teeth into.

Will parks along the street from the house, watching the numbers on his phone so he can ring the bell precisely on time. It's probably thirty seconds before he hears steps approaching, and he's shuffling his feet against the Baltimore chill when the door opens, and for a moment he feels frozen entirely.

Hannibal looks stunning.

On any typical person, the combination of colours and patterns in his suit, waistcoat, tie and pocket square would be dizzying, but Hannibal wears it with a natural elegance and confidence that renders him effortlessly striking. There's not a hint of five-o-clock shadow along his jawline. Hannibal must have shaved again, just for dinner.

"Hi," Will says. "I brought a bottle this time."

Hannibal takes the offered wine and examines the label. "Thank you, Will. This will be perfect for the soup course."

Soup course? It leaves Will wondering just how many courses there are going to be. He'd suspected Hannibal had toned things down a bit for Abigail's benefit last week – it seems like tonight he's getting the full dining experience.

Hannibal must have a lot to talk about.

Hannibal's timed everything to Will's arrival, and he seats him at the dinner table right away while he brings in the appetisers. They make small talk over the start of dinner, predictable exchanges with ample time for eating. Will compliments the food, Hannibal explains something of the cooking process and the spice blend he used. It's mundane, what most people would call 'pleasant', and it's not what either of them are here for.

Will's expecting the change when Hannibal pauses between courses, simply setting his spoon down instead of moving to clear. "Are you sleeping well lately, Will?"

"Still a bit patchy," Will admits. "I wake up a few times every night." It's only been ten days since the Buddish case; he's not expecting anything to normalise so quickly.

"Are your dreams affecting your sleep?"

"They're dreams." Will shrugs, noncommittal. "Everyone has them."

Hannibal's gaze is a weight on him, heavy and keen. "Yours can be more vivid than many people experience, more involving."

Will didn't come here for another session and he doesn't need Hannibal to interpret his dreams. He can recognise the three of them banding together as freaks, outsiders who can't ever fit in.

He has no hesitation including Hannibal in that assessment – the doctor has a hundred fawning acquaintances and few to no friends, as far as Will can tell. Perhaps Alana would count as one, though they seem more like mutually sympathetic colleagues. Hannibal's rapid adoption of a struggling Abigail carries too many echoes of Will taking in strays, and likely stems from the same yawning absence of fulfilment and an underlying loneliness.

He suspects that's why Hannibal so readily agreed to work with Jack. Looking for a challenge better suited to his talents than the daily mundanities of his patients. He must spend big chunks of his life fighting the sink into boredom, hurling himself into multiple complex hobbies to plug the holes and stay afloat.

The Hannibal-creature coming to his door is another easy symbol. Letting people in is inherently dangerous, it carries risk, so Will isolates himself in his house; yet sometimes the monster Will fears isn't frightening at all, sometimes he can be trusted.

Hannibal's stare remains with him, slow-blinking and substantial as the silence stretches thinner.

Will's sitting here eating dinner with his not-quite-psychiatrist, maybe-friend and without Abigail's presence he's acutely aware of how unconventional it is. Of the lighting, all candles and shadows, of the room shrinking down around them, creating a bubble of life and intimacy in the cavernous space of the house.

Will's not ready to trust, not yet. Not quite.

"I take it from the news that we were right about the Ripper," he says. Hannibal might be uncomfortable raising the subject of work, either in his role as a polite host or as a trigger for Will's stress. The issue's easily solved if Will does it instead.

"Have you been reading Tattle Crime, Will?" Hannibal accepts the change of subject with good grace and an elegantly raised eyebrow.

"Hardly," Will says, aware of his face twisting at the name, "but the rumours of Freddie's article have spread through the department. Jack's trying to bait him out?"

"The Ripper has been calling Jack directly. He may even have been inside his home."

Will sucks in a breath long and slow – he was expecting something intriguing, but not *that.* "Jack must be in quite the mood."

"His decisions this week have been strongly based on emotional responses," Hannibal concedes. "It was in such a mindset that he elected to involve Ms Lounds."

"Well, the Ripper's highly likely to kill somebody now," Will says dryly.

Hannibal's lips stretch and thin. "Perhaps."

"You don't think he'll react?"

"I think he would dislike reacting in a predictable manner. He'll wish to reclaim his name, but I doubt he would do it by giving Jack what he expects."

"You believe it's personal for the Ripper now as well as for Jack?"

"The phone calls and visits are certainly personal." Hannibal takes a sip of his wine, and Will can see him considering how much to share. "He left a hair belonging to Miriam Lass on Jack's pillow."

"Jack's dead trainee?" Will's pretty sure his eyebrows are up there with the chandelier. "Well, that's definitely bold. I'm still not sure I'd call it personal though. I think the Ripper prefers to have Jack

distracted.”

“The Ripper is baiting Jack in turn.”

“Provoking those strong emotional responses while he himself remains mildly irritated at most.”

“I find myself wondering what Jack’s next response will be.”

Will eyes fix on Hannibal with all his fascination exposed, bright and unashamed. “I’m much more curious about the Ripper’s.”

A couple of days later, Will hears on the news that a body part belonging to Miriam Lass was left for the FBI to find. It seems Hannibal was right about the Ripper not wanting to do anything remotely predictable.

He figures he’ll talk more with Hannibal about it sometime, but they’re both having dinner with Abigail that night, so he puts it aside in favour of lighter conversation.

His headache stays at bay for once, the food is fantastic, and he has a genuinely engaging evening. When he leaves, his smile is wide and easy for both of them.

Chapter 3

“You’re looking tired, Will,” Hannibal says after they’ve both taken their seats. “Are you still not sleeping?”

The chairs are closer together than they used to be, and Will finds he likes the increased sense of familiarity. There’s no tension now; he’s no longer isolated in this expansive office, pinned in the spotlight of Hannibal’s brilliant mind and gaze.

Hannibal’s gaze hasn’t changed, he knows. Will’s response to it has.

“Some,” Will says. His answer’s evasive, but not untrue. “I had a dream about Abigail last night.”

Hannibal crosses one ankle lightly over the other. “What kind of dream?”

Will looks up towards the ceiling, reaching for the mood, the simple, joyful peace of it. The sensation of a perfect moment, of appreciation and bonding. “We were sitting by a campfire at night, in the fields at the edge of the woods, with the milky way spread across the sky above us. It was warm with a light breeze. Early summer, maybe.” He decides not to mention that the campfire was the burning body of Cassie Boyle, mounted on her rack of antlers. That she’d seemed to belong there, unremarked by either himself or Abigail.

“You and Abigail share a passion for the natural world, for quiet moments away from the crowds,” Hannibal says. “It’s unsurprising that your dreams should put you together in such a setting.”

There’s a habitual reluctance to offer up more than he’s asked for, but the mood from the imaginary night permeates this room too, the comfortably shrinking space between himself and Hannibal. “In the dream, she called me Dad,” Will says.

“An element of wishful thinking, perhaps.” Hannibal’s smile is gentle. “Your attachment to her grows stronger each time you visit.”

“It’s not really a role to aspire to,” Will says. “Her dad wanted to kill her.”

“Which only means she needs a father who will better protect her the second time around.” Hannibal tilts his head, a pause for his contemplative stare. “Perhaps we should talk to Alana and the hospital. Arrange for you to take Abigail to the river, teach her how to fish.”

“I thought about it once,” Will says. “Even bought her the lures. Then I decided it wasn’t such a great idea.”

“I disagree. She finds the atmosphere of the hospital stifling, and while she enjoys her evenings in my home, she has interests that you are better versed in than myself.”

Will can’t really see Hannibal in a set of waders standing thigh deep in a cold river, no matter how keen he is to help Abigail; he flashes on an image of the immaculate doctor slithering about on wet rocks and he has to smile.

“If you have concerns about bad associations, perhaps you could take her out when fishing conditions are poor,” Hannibal suggests. “She would enjoy an afternoon of sun and water in the

woods, even if it fails to provide dinner."

"She'll think I'm a terrible fisherman," Will says with a grimace.

"If you appear to have failings in the eyes of a teenage girl, that will only make you seem a more plausible father figure." Hannibal maintains his professional face, but his humour seeps through every syllable.

"Maybe we could do something," Will concedes. "If not fishing, I could take her out walking with the dogs instead."

"Abigail has an affinity for animals, I'm sure she'd be delighted."

Hannibal's eyes are bright, shining with amusement, but Will can't miss the heavy bags below them, the puffiness around his eyelids. "You don't look like you've been sleeping well either."

Hannibal's lips curve in wry acknowledgement. "I received a phone call in the early hours that disrupted my night."

Will's not aware of Hannibal having any close relations or friendships, and he can only think of one person who'd be pushy enough to wake him in the middle of the night. "Another crime scene?" There's an avid expectation in his voice he's sure Hannibal won't miss, but he genuinely wants to know.

He wants it all.

"Would you like me to describe what I saw, Will?"

Hannibal can tell. Will knows he can tell, but he's asking anyway, because it would be rude to make assumptions. "We might both learn something," he says, and it's not quite nonchalant but it's as close as he's getting.

Hannibal settles himself back fully into his chair, his head angled in thought. "The body was found in a bathtub in a hotel room," he begins. "An adult male, mid to late twenties. He was clothed, a simple T-shirt and trousers. The T-shirt had been sliced from the bottom, angling up the left side of the body over the chest."

The lighting in the bathroom is stark – harsh fluorescents buzzing overhead, glaring into every crevice, brightening every stain within the scene. He sags within the tub, head tipped back to the wall, bloodied hands in his lap; brilliant red embedded beneath his nails and splashed across the side of the tub. Pinprick holes and bruising around the veins in his arm. Two incisions, both almost neat, almost surgical, one ripped open to leave a trail of fleshy pieces across the room from the bed, the other too rushed to be truly precise…

Stop. Go back.

Begin.

The man on the bed starts gasping, howling, noises too incoherent to even be a scream. He lurches upright, scrabbling at his clothes, clawing at the sutures beneath, dragging them free with clinging chunks of his own skin. He can't let him hurt himself, he's ruining it, destroying the work, he has to stop him, has to, has to, but he's strong and frantic and it's *hard* to stop him, oh shit, panic, can't

panic, have to stop him! Half-carrying, half-fighting, half-dragging him to the bathroom, pushing him down into the tub to get control, have to get control, but now he's not fighting, he's gone limp, oh shit, oh shit, no pulse, *no pulse.*

What to do, he's trained, he knows what to do; the scalpel, grab the scalpel, slice the T-shirt and peel it back. Count the ribs, find the space, cut between them, deep and fast, no time to hold back, all the way in, spread the ribs, ignore them cracking, breaking. Mind the lungs, find the heart, grasp it, squeeze it –

He blinks and he's back in the office, disappointment settling over him with the heavy pressure of a winter blanket.

"Internal cardiac massage," he says. There's no design to it. Just mess.

A single, slow nod from Hannibal. "That was my conclusion as well."

Will's lip quirks up at the corner. "If you keep telling Jack none of his crime scenes are the Ripper, you're going to fall out of favour."

"Not when I'm proven to be correct."

Will considers Hannibal, assessing his seat in his chair, his relaxed hands and still face. "You seem very confident that you are."

"More so since you concur." Hannibal sits back into his chair and his lips tighten and thin. "Jack wasn't the only member of the team who was displeased with my conclusion."

"Zeller?" The expression on Hannibal's face is his answer, and Will gives an amused huff of air. "Zeller can be pushy."

"He can be unconscionably rude," Hannibal says. "I see little point in consulting an outside expert and then immediately discounting their conclusions."

"You'll get used to him," Will says. "The best way is by ignoring him."

"That remains to be seen."

There's a bladed edge to his voice, and Will's suddenly sure Alana isn't the only psychiatrist he knows who can be fiery. Although fiery wouldn't be the right word – Hannibal's anger would be tightly controlled, nurtured and exercised with precision.

He wonders if he should have a quiet word with Zeller, but Zeller wouldn't listen anyway and frankly he deserves whatever he happens to get.

The thought's dismissed after only a moment; there's a far more interesting subject in the room than Brian Zeller.

"So, if the Ripper's not responsible for the body in the bathtub, who do you think is?"

Alana's genuinely enthusiastic at the suggestion of Abigail coming along when he exercises the dogs, and Will arranges to take her out on Sunday.

He could have said Saturday, or even Friday since he only has classes in the morning, but he chooses the day when Hannibal has no scheduled patients.

He starts dialling Hannibal twice to invite him to come along, then hangs up.

The third time, he lets the call go through, and he's almost surprised when Hannibal says he'd love to be there.

He can't quite ignore the trickle of pleasure twisting through him as they discuss the arrangements.

It makes sense for Hannibal to collect Abigail from the hospital since he lives much closer, and the Bentley sweeps up Will's driveway on a cold, windswept afternoon. He's listening for its approach, the crunch of tyres over gravel louder than the refined note of the engine. Will's mainly glad that the rain's held off the last couple of days and he won't be taking them on a march through a swamp.

He'd had some concerns about what Hannibal might consider suitable clothes for walking seven dogs, but when Hannibal comes around the front of the car to open the door for Abigail, Will's pleasantly surprised. He's wearing sensible layers, a woollen sport coat over a sweater over a shirt, and plain slacks tucked into leather boots.

Maybe he's more than pleasantly surprised. The boots are beautifully shaped to Hannibal's calves, emphasising their slim length beneath the polished sheen of the hide, and Will's suddenly feeling self-conscious about his practical rubber ones.

He pulls his hat down over his ears before he opens the screen door, and the dogs rush out to meet Hannibal, greeting him with the wagging, tongue-lolling enthusiasm reserved for a known bringer of food. Abigail gets a more cautious welcome with much sniffing, but with Will's verbal introduction and Abigail's delighted rubbing of ears, she's accepted as a wanted human almost immediately.

Abigail says hi with a smile nearly as big as the one she'd aimed at Winston, and he gives in to the impulse to pull her into a brief hug. She's slight and delicate through the winter layers, soft where before she'd braced against the wind, and he's grinning wide when he lets her go.

She draws back and looks at him curiously. "Did you get contacts? You're not wearing your glasses."

Hannibal's standing behind her, a slight curl of amusement at his lips, and his eyebrows lift as he waits for will's answer.

Will's laugh is quick and short, his mouth twisting ruefully – he's not used to explaining himself to teenagers. "I don't really need them much," he says, skirting somewhere around the edge of truth. "Maybe for reading sometimes, if the light's bad. Wearing them tends to be more of a habit than anything else."

She doesn't question it, doesn't hesitate to accept it, just tilts her head as she looks him over. "You should get some new frames that don't hide your eyes," she says. "Thinner ones, try metal instead of tortoiseshell."

"I'll look into it," he says, and he has to grin, because apparently now he's getting fashion advice from seventeen-year-old girls, and she whirls away in a flurry of scarf and coat-tails.

The dogs have already taken off, sniffing and barking, scenting away from the paths for the rabbits and deer. The meadow glows in the sun, the golden lengths of dead grass dancing patterns of light and shadow with the shifts of the wind.

He has his dogs, his harbour-home, and the two most important people in his life.

Abigail's chasing after Buster and Zoe, sliding across the damp grass with no hope of ever catching them, strands of hair escaping from her pony tail and flying loose around her face. She's laughing and playing like the kid she really is, instead of the poised young woman she's trying so hard to be.

Will's suddenly overwhelmed with a flood of gratitude that Jack let him go, that he didn't push him to stay active with the BSU. He would never have reached this place with Abigail if he'd been working cases all hours; he wouldn't have made the effort to visit her so often if he'd been experiencing death every day and dragging it behind him to the hospital each time.

He looks over at Hannibal, who's watching Abigail with an identical quiet aura of joy. Whatever product he uses in his hair has been no match for the wind, and it flops down across his forehead almost to his eyes, adding to the relaxed air Will feels from the set of his chin and shoulders.

Hannibal must feel Will's eyes on him, turning to look and smile, a smile Will easily returns.

If Jack hadn't let him go, he would have missed out on all of this.

Will watches the trainees file out of the room with a deepening sense of gratitude for the clock and its announcement of five-thirty. After two full days of teaching classes, he finds he's genuinely looking forward to his scheduled session with Hannibal in a couple of hours. 'Therapy' has morphed into an excuse for a series of truly stimulating conversations, and he could use one of those this evening.

He has a chunk of submitted work to go over first, though, and it's easier to make a start on that in the lecture hall when he's still in work mode. He takes another couple of naproxen for his headache

and spreads the crime scene photos across the desk; it's easier to refer back to them without constantly having to tab in and out, and he opens up the first file.

There's a lot less incentive to get into this later when he's sitting at home with a whiskey in his hand. There's not much incentive to get into it at all, when he's honest. Too many of his students take a simplistic approach to the psychology of murder. It's easy to look at the immediate trigger and say, 'That's why he did it,' conveniently ignoring that a half million other people have that exact same trigger in their emotional history and managed to get past it without killing anybody.

Triggers are uninspiring. It's the underlying predisposition, the layers of personality that have to be unravelled to explain why any single trigger makes that particular person choose murder out of all the available options – that's the puzzle, the fascination of analysing violence. The necessity and challenge of understanding those urges.

Of maybe learning the best ways to control them.

Frustrated by yet another essay pinned entirely on the superficial, the refusal to slice past the surface and probe into the depths of the messy flesh beneath, he slumps back in his chair, stretching his arms overhead and popping his shoulders as he stares up towards the ceiling.

Elliot Buddish hangs suspended from the roof of the hall, his face serene as the ropes hold him in place, elevated, exactly as he was in the barn.

His eyes open, immediately finding Will's in the empty space of the room, and the bloodied skin of his wings darkens and lengthens, sprouting feathers black as the heart of the galaxy. The ropes unravel from his wrists and his newly strengthened wings beat long and slow as he drifts down to the floor to stand before Will.

He's not kneeling now; he knows his power. His wings furl, the tips brushing lightly along his ankles.

"I was afraid." His gaze on Will is a fixed thing, a single point in the looming space of the hall. "I knew what I had to become to end my fear."

"You saw your future and you stopped running," Will says.

Buddish cocks his head, regards Will with something oddly like sympathy. "Do you know what to become to end yours?"

Will hears the clicking of hooves along the corridor beyond the door. "I have more choices than you did."

"You have two," Buddish counters. "To live in fear or to live."

"Will?" There's a voice coming from outside, echoing through from the corridor along with the beat of hooves. "Are you awake, Will?"

Buddish doesn't react to the approaching beast, only waits for Will to give his answer. His eyes are dark and they sing with the knowledge of the dead. *Do you know?*

"Will." The voice is insistent, closer, and Will wants to look to see who it is but he can't tear his gaze away. "I'd like you to answer me if you can, Will."

Will blinks, and Hannibal's standing in front of him, peering down at him with overt concern. He looks beyond Hannibal's shoulder, searching the room behind him, but Buddish has gone.

Will glances down to the laptop with its open essay file and then back to Hannibal. "What are you doing here?"

It sounds rude even to his own ears, much too brusque for greeting Hannibal, but he's not at his most sociable when he's just been woken up.

"I have a twenty-four hour cancellation policy," Hannibal says, and there's enough humour lifting the statement for Will to know he understands.

Will blinks again, casts his eyes over his watch. It's almost nine already? How did it get so late? "Sorry, I must have fallen asleep."

The slinking unease behind Hannibal's eyes hasn't abated, an alley cat creeping through the shadows of his thoughts. "You weren't dreaming, Will, not in the conventional sense. Your eyes were open, but you weren't present in the room."

Will pushes up from his chair, his hands slamming down on the table among the spread of photos. "What the hell does that mean? I did what you said, I quit, and I should be getting better by now, but it's not, everything just keeps getting worse." He glares across at Hannibal, the man who's supposed to be his paddle, his answer. "What's your professional opinion on that, Doctor?"

Hannibal doesn't react to his aggression, only observes and considers. "I asked you once before if you missed working the active cases."

"Yeah, I told you I don't."

Hannibal straightens away from the table, his hands tucking into his pockets. "Your empathy is a unique part of yourself, Will, a part that you rarely express," he says gently. "You keep it locked away behind your meticulously constructed forts."

"A socially mandated choice," Will says, staring at Hannibal with lips parted and a flash of teeth. "People don't find my expression of it palatable."

"And so the only time you can fully be yourself is in the mind of a killer. Inhabiting a murderer, you feel no guilt, no qualms at invading someone's privacy. You have the full blessing of the law and morality to share their experience, to live every moment of taking a life and feel their exhilaration in it."

Will snorts in air, his lip twisting. "You think I can only be content if I keep on imagining killers?"

"Not at all. I believe you can only be true to yourself if you leave the cage of your own making." Hannibal looks down at the layers of detailed, bloody photos spread across the desk, reaches out to trail a hand along the pile. Returns his gaze to Will's eyes as he finishes. "There are alternatives to acting the role of a killer in your head, Will."

Something in the way he says it hovers between certainty and suggestion, a butterfly dancing patterns in the air, and Will's anger flips more to curiosity. "Such as?"

“That’s for you to determine. As a psychiatrist, I can’t tell you the details of how you should live your life. I can only provide some guidance on areas where you might look to improve it.”

Will sighs and looks back down to the photos, the open file with its blinking cursor. It’s unfair of him to take his frustrations out on Hannibal, he knows that. But if following Hannibal’s advice hasn’t been enough to stop him spiralling from headaches into blackouts and hallucinations, what the hell can he do?

Hannibal’s phone rings in his pocket, and he pulls it out and greets Jack by name. Tells him that he’s already on the premises, and he’ll meet him outside shortly.

When he ends the call, Hannibal’s attention turns immediately back to Will. “It appears Ms Katz has found a lead to our hotel room kidney remover. Would you care to come along and see if we were right?”

Will doesn’t need to look to know he’s right, but he’s always been detail oriented, and the tiniest impressions can add delicate brush-strokes to the painting he creates in his head for the next case. “Sure, why not?”

They make their way out to the main entrance where Jack and Beverly are waiting by a car. Jack’s gaze sweeps back and forth between them, clearly making the connection as to why Hannibal was hanging around Quantico at night.

His assessment switches to concern when Will climbs into the car. “Maybe you should stay away, Will. We don’t know what we’re going to find when we get there.”

Will fires him a sharp look through the open door. “If it’s something I don’t want to see, nobody’s going to make me look, right?”

Jack hesitates a moment, then shrugs. “Right,” he says firmly, and takes the driver’s seat.

Their first call is the ambulance depot, where they discover a missing ambulance and the name of its last driver. A man who has ambitions towards surgery, who’s learned the anatomy and techniques, and Will finds Hannibal’s eyes, the shared vindication within.

The ambulance is in the light industrial district, parked half inside a warehouse. At this time of night, it’s quiet, isolated, sparsely lit with no passers-by.

Hannibal and Will hang back while the SWAT crew go in, their shadows stretching long in the yellow light from the street behind. The doors are pried open fast and efficient, and Jack cocks his shotgun at whoever’s inside.

“Doctor Lecter,” Jack yells, his voice carrying effortlessly across the concrete of the parking lot, and Hannibal strides forward, breaking into a trot as he gets closer.

Will stays alongside him, because he wants to, because he has to, and the fluorescents reveal a man in a paramedic’s uniform with bloodied gloves digging in the side of a figure covered in surgical drapes.

Hannibal steps up, peeling off his jacket and snapping on his own pair of latex gloves. His face is a study in concentration, total professionalism as he takes over from the shaken, resigned-relieved Silvestri.

Will watches as Hannibal wields the surgical tools, the power of life and death personified leaning over the unconscious victim. Watches Hannibal's hands, quick, sure, precise, the muscles in his forearms standing taut, emphasising the course of his veins beneath his skin.

He watches and he doesn't feel the nameless victim; he doesn't feel Silvestri, sweating and shivering as he drops to his knees before the rifles on the rough, unforgiving concrete. He only feels Hannibal, feels the confidence of him, the satisfaction and the knowledge that they were right all along, meeting his eyes and finding the thrill of truth and the ability to change the world.

"I asked you once before if you missed working the active cases."

He's standing in the frosty Baltimore night looking at a killer, looking at a victim who almost died but might survive, the actions of his hands, of Hannibal's hands, determining who lives and dies, as they did for Abigail.

Does he miss it?

In this moment he only knows he's alive, he's pure; he's locked into Hannibal's mind and still wholly himself, a juxtaposition of *them* that's entirely natural. Understanding flows both ways, Hannibal's gaze resting on Will's as his hands work by touch. Hannibal knows he's there, knows Will's in his space, in his thoughts, and he doesn't resent it; he doesn't balk and back away, he holds Will in his eyes as they bleed into each other and Will shares the heat of flesh around his fingers, the press of the wound upon his gloved wrists.

Will breathes with it and it settles inside him; the physical control, the influence, the *potential* to alter the course of a life, and it thrums in his chest, in every rush of his pulse over bone and further, deeper, into all the layers of his skin.

A couple of days later, Jack walks into Will's classroom at the end of his final lecture. He waits between the rows of seats, ignoring the curious glances of the students as they file out past him.

Will knows before he asks that it's not a social call. Jack doesn't make those. He only glances up briefly as Jack approaches, then goes back to unhooking his laptop. "What can I do for you, Jack?"

"I just wanted to check on how you're doing."

Will pushes his glasses up his nose, tucks his laptop securely into his case. "I'm doing fine."

"That's what I was hoping you'd say." Jack pauses, shoves his hands deeper into his pockets. "You didn't seem to have any problems the other night, at the ambulance. You were okay with being there."

Will arches his eyebrows, a quick twist of his lips. "Well nobody died, that always helps."

Jack takes another step, props himself against the edge of the desk only an inch from Will's arm. "I was wondering if you've got any idea when you might be up to coming back to work."

Will resists the urge to point out that he's already at work and deliberately relaxes his jaw so he's not speaking through his teeth. "Are Hannibal's profiles not good enough for you?"

"Hannibal's doing fine," Jack says. It's a telling choice of word – 'fine' has never been good enough for Jack. "He's not you, Will. He doesn't have your years of expertise and groundwork in criminal cases. This case turned out not to be the Ripper, but the next one might be. He's not just going to vanish again after leaving me Miriam's arm."

There's a mountain of frustration and bitterness swelling within Jack's words, and yeah, that's understandable enough. Will looks at him, really looks at him for the first time since he walked into the room, braced against the waves of exhaustion and despair beating down around him. "If it helps any, I've agreed with Hannibal's assessments on all the cases you've given him."

"You've discussed them with him?"

Jack's lips are tight with annoyance, and Will's sympathy dissolves just as fast. "I'm only on leave from the field, Jack, I've still got clearance."

"That's not what I meant." Jack's voice has softened, one of those gleaming moments of affinity he so rarely allows. "You were supposed to be taking a break, I didn't think you wanted to be involved in live investigations."

"I'm not involved, not really. We just talk."

Jack's studying him, assessing his answer, and there's genuine concern burying the layers of self-interest now. "How much detail goes into these talks?"

Will doesn't want to lie. Jack did right by him, when he needed space; he deserves some trust in return. "All of it," he says, and he stops messing with his bag, sets it flat on the desk. "It's different, having Hannibal go through it with me. I don't have to walk into a crime scene and look, I just have to theorise on the abstracts. It works this way, Jack." It works when he doesn't have to face down the gauntlet of cops and forensics teams, all of them staring at him like he's the lead attraction at the freak show. It works when there's only Hannibal, who watches him with approbation and understanding and a complete absence of judgement.

Jack breathes out long and slow, and some of the tension drops from his shoulders. "Okay, I get it. I guess I've still got your contribution coming in, that's more than I thought I had." He turns his head further and gives Will a pointed look. "I can only stretch the budget to paying one outside consultant, though, and it's not going to be you if you're not at the scene."

Will tilts his head. "I get to keep my brain from stagnating and help make the world a safer place. I've already been doing it for free, no need to stop just because you're in on the secret."

Jack throws a quick glance at his watch and pushes himself away from the desk. "Maybe we can both make the best of the compromise, for now."

Will doesn't miss the significance of that 'for now'. He knows Jack's going to keep on asking.

Chapter 4

He's sitting in the armchair sipping his evening whiskey when the phone rings on its charger across the room. The dogs ignore the sound – it's not one that interests them – and he pushes Winston's head from his lap to go answer it.

It's Hannibal's name lighting up the screen, and the gentle glow of the letters evokes the same brightness within Will. "Hello, Will. I hope I'm not disturbing you?"

It's not late, and there's nothing in Will's life to disturb. "No, it's just me and the dogs by the fire."

"Exactly the kind of peaceful evening I would prescribe for you," Hannibal says, and his smile carries through in his voice. "Although I would also prescribe some company on occasion. Abigail and I are having dinner tomorrow night, and we would very much like you to join us."

"Since my name's not Brian Zeller, I should probably respect your professional opinion," Will teases, and then he lets his voice soften. "That sounds great. I'd love to."

He actually means it, and it's almost a surprise – a social invitation that he welcomes instead of grudgingly accepting. One he finds he's already looking forward to, a low warmth in his belly that comes from more than just the whiskey.

"Would seven work for you?"

Hannibal cooks earlier when Abigail comes, so there's plenty of time to eat and talk and get her back to the hospital before her curfew. "Yeah, seven's good."

"Perfect, we'll see you then."

Hannibal's about to say goodbye and hang up, and Will has to stop him. "Hannibal?"

"Yes, Will?"

A quick internal debate on whether he really wants to ask, but it suddenly matters that he knows. "You didn't tell Jack that I was discussing your cases with you? The murders?"

A micro-pause before Hannibal answers, a bare hint of hesitation that wouldn't mean anything if he were someone else. "No, I didn't."

"Why not?" It rings horribly accusatory in Will's own ears, and he quickly tag-lines it with humour. "Did you want to keep all the credit for yourself?"

"I didn't deliberately mislead Jack, there were simply some things I chose not to mention." Hannibal's voice is measured, almost cautious, and there's another, longer gap before he says the rest. "I was worried that if he knew you were involved, he would demand more from you. Put pressure on you to return on a more formal basis."

"You made yourself a buffer between me and Jack Crawford." Part of Will spikes in offense, sharp and irritated, but there's another, deeper part of him curling satisfied, knowing Hannibal thought about him and wanted to help.

“I don’t believe you need to be protected, Will,” Hannibal says, and the caution’s missing now, leaving only the solid floor of truth. “You’ve already demonstrated that you can resolve your own battles with Jack. I believe you deserve to be allowed the space that you asked for, the space you were promised to make your own choices.”

It’s… a nice compromise. The kind of caring that’s inherent in friendship, not the belief that he’s some fragile ornament to be locked away behind glass. “Okay, well, he knows now, so you won’t need to watch what you say around him anymore.”

“Thank you for letting me know. It will make my conversations with Jack a little easier.”

It feels like Will should say something more, but he doesn’t know what.

“Good night, Will. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“I’ll be there,” Will says, and the phone clicks into silence.

He takes another couple of naproxen before bed. He’ll need to buy more, the bottle’s running low.

He dreams of the three of them that night, of the woods and hooves and towering antlers. Bones litter their path, bleached white by time and gleaming in the moonlight, splintering underfoot as they walk.

They move on, together, because that’s what matters, the crushed wreckage of the dead left unremarked.

Will tugs at the collar of his shirt as he waits, his skin sweaty and itchy beneath the cotton. He hasn’t messed with the climate control in his car, but the drive over felt stuffy and confining.

He hopes he’s not coming down with something; that might ruin everyone’s dinner.

There are footsteps inside, quick and light – definitely Abigail, and there’s a lift in his chest at the thought of seeing her.

Something’s different.

He knows within seconds of her opening the door. She smiles at him, light and breezy, says, “Hey, Will, come on in,” but there’s tension writhing and crawling over her shoulders, an entire army of ants in Will’s vision following the trail of a single chemical lie.

He looks beyond her into the dim emptiness of the hallway. “Where’s Hannibal?”

“Hannibal’s too busy with the food right now to welcome his guests.” She throws a cheeky grin over her shoulder as she heads deeper into the house, but her words are stilted, almost clipped in the push to get them out.

They sound practised. Deliberate. Sugar sprinkled into the bitterness of cocoa to create a chocolate that’s easily palatable.

Hannibal’s in the kitchen, stripping off his apron and hanging it on the nearby hook. “Hello, Will, you’re just in time.” He gives Will one of his quick, slight smiles, methodically rolling his shirt sleeves back down as he talks. “Would you mind setting the side plates on the table for me? I’m afraid I’ve been a little disorganised this evening.”

He’s disguising it far better than Abigail, but Will sees an ant crawling over the shoulder of Hannibal’s waistcoat just the same.

Dinner is an exercise in walling away his empathy and covering his responses to everything that still leaks through. Abigail’s tense throughout, her eyes flickering back and forth between them and down to her plate. The air thickens around her, pressing down on her, her every muscle taut to resist the force of it, her head bowing when she loses the fight.

The aura isn’t confined to her. Hannibal’s mask of cheerful normality fits well, but not flawlessly. He’s watching with the judicious eyes of the psychiatrist, not the effervescence of the perfect dinner host.

There’s conversation as they eat, but it doesn’t flow easily – mainly it’s Hannibal ensuring they don’t descend into silence, entertaining them with stories about the food, about the traditions and history of the Alsace region of France the dish hails from.

A fourth figure is seated in the chair next to Abigail, shadowed and semi-translucent at first, but its form solidifies and condenses as the meal goes on. A figure tall and slender as it settles into its shape.

Still and patient, it waits its turn.

Abigail finishes the last of her food and her utensils drop to her plate, clattering against the fine china before she gathers them neatly together.

Hannibal takes one more sip of his wine then lays his own silverware to rest on his plate, though it isn’t yet empty.

The waiting is almost over, and Will and the uninvited guest both switch their eyes to Hannibal.

He dabs at his lips lightly with a napkin before he finally speaks. “Will, I must confess to an ulterior motive in asking you to join us this evening. We have something significant we wish to tell you.” Hannibal looks over at Abigail, who’s watching him with huge, unblinking eyes, and he gives her a single, encouraging nod.

Abigail turns back to Will across the table, the slow, heavy draw of her breath filling the room. “It was me,” she says, and her eyes sink down to the table, to the plate in front of her. “I did it.” And then she’s looking up again, sharp and bold in her determination. “I killed Nick Boyle.”

The words take a moment to sink in, and he's sweeping his eyes back and forth between Hannibal and Abigail, trying to make any kind of sense out of what he's hearing. There's no shock or emerging humour in Hannibal's face; he's entirely still and serious, and Will finds himself drawn back to Abigail. "You *killed* him?"

"He attacked me, so I stabbed him." There's fear in her, suspended there acid and high, fear of rejection, fear of *him*. But there's ferocity too, a potent confidence in herself, in her abilities; it pours from her with the force of a flood, splashing down onto the dining table and spreading out across the polished wood. She's inevitable as water, a stream who will briefly yield to outside forces until she finds a way to wind between the boulders, and a torrent who will plunge from the heights and wear away the rocks beneath.

Nick Boyle sits beside her, the white eyes of the dead staring in silent witness, his hand clasped to his ruptured torso, holding himself intact.

Will tears his eyes from Abigail, from the pride of her strength, and his eyes narrow as he turns towards Hannibal. "How long have you known?"

"I knew immediately," Hannibal says. His voice is calm and purely matter-of-fact. "I helped her dispose of the body."

And on some level he'd known, he'd known about Abigail, but the shock now as he stares at Hannibal is a strike from a baseball bat slamming into the small of his back. *"Why?"*

"It all happened exactly as we told you, Will. Nick Boyle was threatening, violent, and Abigail struck out in self-defence. She only did so more effectively than we reported to the authorities."

He's spinning, he's spinning in it, his mind a whirlpool of consequence and implications and he can feel his headache thrumming into life again at the back of his skull. So many possibilities, so many alternatives wheeling away from that one act, the multiple arms of a spiral galaxy twisting through time and space. A million questions burning like stars birthing in a nebula, and the first one that coalesces on his tongue is, "What did you do with the body?"

"He's buried, and the spot is well disguised with undergrowth," Hannibal says. "I'm sure no passer-by would recognise it as a grave."

There's a disconnect in Will's head, to be sitting here discussing homicide and the disposal of evidence, and Hannibal's so damn *calm* and practical about it, no different from the theoreticals of the cases they've worked. Hannibal's talking about hiding corpses with considerably less emotion than when he talks about perfecting sauces.

"And what if he *is* found?" Will demands.

"I don't have your expertise with forensics, Will, but I know enough." Hannibal has straightened, aloof, offended that Will feels the need to ask. "I did take some precautions."

Okay, okay, so they're probably safe from repercussions, for the short term at least. The body's gone this long without discovery; Hannibal has some justification for his confidence.

Abigail.

Abigail did this; she's been living with this, and with only Hannibal to confide in.

She's watching him with wide, distraught eyes, staring into the focussed headlight glare of his anger. An anger born purely of fear, fear for his strange, newfound kin, a fear that has spread and contaminated and it can't be endured.

He stands and walks around the table towards her. He banishes Nick Boyle from his chair and the corpse shivers and melts back into the substance of the air, a curl of dark smoke within the light of the candles.

Will takes his seat alongside her, reaching out to clasp each of her hands within his own. There's a tremor through her body right down to her fingers, her face frozen, unblinking.

"You did nothing wrong, Abigail. You have every right to defend yourself, and that's what you did." He lets go of one hand and reaches up to push her hair back behind her ear. "There's no reason for you to feel any guilt."

Another quiver and now she's moving, the slightest tilt of her head to meet his touch, the twist of her fingers to tighten on his own. Her eyes drop away, her voice thin and high. "I don't. Feel guilty about it. I should though, right?" And she's the torrent again, determined and fierce, demanding his acquiescence as her gaze lifts in challenge. "But I don't. Nick Boyle killed Marissa and he deserved to die, and I'm glad I killed him."

There's only one reaction he can possibly give her. He leans forward and encloses both of her hands once again. "Me too, if the alternative is that he might have hurt you."

Something flares within her, something small and tremulous and hopeful, an expression tragically reminiscent of when he offers food to a starving stray. "Did you feel guilty when you killed my dad?"

He looks her in the eye and slowly shakes his head. "He killed your mom. He tried to kill you. When I shot him, it felt… righteous."

"You felt good."

He looks over at Hannibal, who already knows the answer to that question, and his still face offers Will no solution.

It's not an answer Abigail deserves to hear; she needs to feel safe here with them.

Will can't lie to her, but he can shift the emphasis of his words. "I had the power to stop him. To save you. Doing it felt good."

A brightness kindles inside her, a spark to match the dancing of the candles reflected in her eyes. A flicker of movement segues into hesitation, and then she erupts in her torrent of courage, dragging her hands free and lunging forward to wrap her arms around him. She's warm with her hair pressed against his neck, and his hands rise instinctively to her back, stroking over her sweater with the calming movements so effective on his dogs.

He's looking over her shoulder at Hannibal, exploring the minutiae of his face; he's relaxed now and that same light of flame shimmers in him, manifest in the soft curve of his lips.

When Abigail pulls away, her eyes are damp, and she swipes at them with one hand. "Thanks for, well, everything, I guess," she says, and now she's glancing back and forth between them. "And

thanks for letting me come here like this. With both of you. I feel like I can really be me when I'm here." Her eyes drop back to her empty plate, before she peers up through the spray of her lashes. "It feels like home."

Most nights, Will leaves when it's time for Hannibal to drive Abigail back to Port Haven. This time he goes along with them.

They drop her at the door with hugs and reassurances, then climb back into the Bentley and peel away.

Will rests his head on the window, enjoying the cool of it against his temple as he looks out into the sick yellow light of the street lamps. The outskirts of the city pass by, a grid of identical streets in colour-sapped brick and concrete, stretching for miles with no respite.

Will came because they needed to talk alone, after Abigail left. The world is flawed and ugly, and sometimes the best solutions to it can be ugly too. "You were right to cover it up," he says. "Jack would've eaten her alive."

They have to protect Abigail. And now he has to protect Hannibal as well.

He's no longer sure which of those matters more.

"Ms Lounds' reaction wouldn't have been in Abigail's best interests either." The acid note is back in Hannibal's voice, the one that goes along with any mention of Freddie.

Will lifts his face away from the glass, turning to look at him. "Jack's not going to let it drop. He'll move to arrest her at some point, have her questioned officially."

"I've discussed with her exactly what she should say," Hannibal assures him. "Her story will pass."

"Did you work on how she should say it?"

"Most of what she says will be the truth, Will. It's only the ending that's new."

Will shakes his head. "She'll need to avoid the obvious tells, Jack will see them. I'll go through the cues with her, she'll need to practice."

"Don't rehearse too much," Hannibal cautions. "There needs to be some natural variation when she talks, or it will sound like a learned speech."

They're both right. Selling a lie to FBI behavioural specialists takes a fine line. "We can work with her together, next time she comes for dinner."

“I’ll talk to Alana,” Hannibal says. “Perhaps we can arrange something for the weekend.”

Will’s not sure the weekend will be soon enough. He hasn’t seen Jack in weeks, but he doesn’t have to.

Abigail is Jack’s target, has been since the day her father died. Jack hunts people down; he never lets them go. He’s still hunting Will, even now.

He can’t have Abigail. Will won’t let him.

It’s okay. They have time. Jack has no proof that Nick Boyle is even dead. There’s enough scope to protect her.

The minutes pass, the purr of the engine, the warmth of the heater, the street signs in the glow of the headlamps. The car sweeps them through the night until they’re home.

Will’s car is parked across the street. He’s sitting in the Bentley with his seatbelt on, feeling no urge to release it and leave.

The engine’s ticking as it cools and Hannibal hasn’t moved yet either; he’s looking over at him in the dark, silhouetted against the glow from the house. “Would you come inside and join me for a drink, Will?”

A drink sounds like a great idea right now. Sharing one with Hannibal might be the only thing that sounds better.

“Yeah. I would,” he says with a quiet emphasis, and there’s that flash-glow of warmth from Hannibal before he turns away to open the door, the night air flooding cool through the car.

They walk side by side up the pathway in silence; Hannibal unlocks, then steps aside to let Will enter first.

Hannibal’s footsteps echo behind him, and Will pauses in the hallway, touches his hand to Hannibal’s elbow as he walks by. “Why did you tell me?”

Hannibal stops at the pressure, the slightest pause before he turns back to look at him. “We didn’t want to keep deceiving you, Will. I find I don’t wish to lie to you, even lies of omission.” Will doesn’t miss the change of pronoun, and it’s not surprising or odd when Hannibal reaches up to lay his hand on Will’s shoulder. “I would prefer there to be no more secrets between us.”

“You trusted me.” Most people he knows wouldn’t trust Will Graham with anything more than a stray dog.

“I’ll always trust you, Will. I believe in you.” Hannibal’s sincerity is breath-taking, a bubble of purity curling around them both. A flawless surface, illuminated gently by truth, not a ripple of doubt to mar it.

Hannibal’s hand shifts and he’s not touching Will’s coat any more, he’s warm and light over the skin of his neck. “There’s another secret I would prefer not to keep, and as Jack is no longer charging me with the responsibility of monitoring your mental health, I don’t believe it would be a violation of ethics for me to reveal it.” A single finger strokes once across the stubble at his jaw. “I

value your friendship most highly, Will, but lately I find myself wondering if perhaps we could be more."

Hannibal's words are as smooth and well-harmonised as always, but there's a hesitancy behind them, a hint of fear, of *maybe too much* and that thread of vulnerability unravelling from his immaculate armour is astounding.

Hannibal wants this, actually really wants it – it's a thick air of hope, a coiling knot of desire wrapped around that dark twist of doubt, and Will has to untangle himself from Hannibal, separate from the overwhelming allure of it to ask himself what *he* wants.

And of course he wants – there's always been a frisson, a tingling awareness of physicality, even back when he was sitting in a cheap motel room and telling him, 'I don't find you that interesting.' But does he want *this*, does he want all Hannibal's monumental intensity, want the risk of losing his grip on this friendship and watching it shatter in a thousand shards as it hits the floor?

The friendship set against the chance, a singular chance, and he's frozen in the moment of choice.

The light diminishes, the hope collapsing into the vacuum of resignation, and Hannibal steps aside. "My apologies, Will, I shouldn't have pushed."

The vacuum's expanding, a sucking darkness, an event horizon with no way back, and Will steps inside it, his fingers clenched tight around Hannibal's bicep. "Push," he says. "Push me more." He closes the last inch to kiss, and they're touching, with skin and lips and need, a moment of time stretched to infinity, only them, only them, only them.

He finds Hannibal, finds the presence of him, finds the steel reality of him. Finds the rhythm of him in the slide of mouth and tongue, the slow squeeze of his arms wound around his waist. Presses close and finds him physically, the full length of him against Will, calves and thighs and cock all in contact.

"Push," he demands against his lips, but it's Will who's pushing, who's rocking and rubbing and breathing. It's been so long since he touched and was touched like this, sucked into the wanting, feeling his own desire and the jolting charge of someone else wanting *him*. Hannibal's mouth on him and his skin on him, and Will's fingers find the gaps in his clothes, the spaces between the buttons, pressing through to find the flesh of him.

"Push," and it's almost a mantra now because he wants this, wants to have all of it before it fractures and the chance is gone.

"Upstairs," Hannibal murmurs by his ear, and Will's feet move without thinking, his hands on the man, his shoes on the carpet, his lips on sweat and a fine layer of stubble, and there's no more vacuum, no time, no space, there's only here and the charge between them. They're tight in the crush of it, the drag of the singularity, the unstoppable force, and then there's a bed and sheets and they're pulling away clothes.

Clothes give way to skin and friction, and it's inevitable how they move, messy and ragged as they touch one another, hands wrapped around one another. Breathing one another, eyes on one another, living and absorbing one another as they curl and rut against one another until Hannibal gasps and climaxes, wet and warm between them.

It takes Will longer, too much longer. He wants and needs and wants, and it makes no sense; he should have come sooner, much sooner, grinding against this man, this passion, this friend, their sweat combined heavy in his nostrils and damp beneath his fingers. He should have come sooner, but Hannibal takes it and encourages it, meeting him, working him until he finally finishes with a jerk and a shudder.

They're sticky and panting and clinging, and the quiet settles.

They're sticky and panting, breathing only inches away from each other's eyes.

This is when it gets awkward, when they both realise they're a mess and coated in each other's fluids and they really should have brushed their teeth before they did this. When two people want to get up and get clean, but nobody wants to be the first to move and have the other think they're ruining the mood, so they lie together, both wanting to be somewhere else.

It's not like that.

Hannibal reaches up with his left hand, the one not streaked in come, cupping Will's cheek and sliding fingers into the damp mess of his curls. "I'm delighted you decided to stay."

Will gives him a brief smile, resists the urge to press his face into the hand. "You're attractive, rich, attentive, charming – I can't believe many people say no."

Hannibal deflects the attempt at levity, his eyes roaming Will's face, his expression direct and wholly absorbed. "Those are superficial traits, Will. They would bring people to my bed, assuming I wanted them there, but very few people have the ability to see more of me, and even fewer would care to."

Will's breath leaves him in a quick huff of humour. "That's even more true for me."

"I'll always want to see more of you, Will." Hannibal's fingers are in constant motion, a slow regular stroking through the hair by his temple. "I want to see everything, even those things you fear in yourself."

"You already know most of those," Will says, because it's true.

"I'll be enchanted when you show me the rest."

Will raises his eyebrows and reaches for the tease again. "That's a bold statement, Doctor."

"I've always found it best to be honest about what I want. With myself, with the people who are important to me."

There's too much intensity, too much *truth* there, and Will drops his eyes to Hannibal's collarbone, trails his hand along the line where the hair begins. "I learned thirty years ago to keep my inner thoughts my own. I don't think I'm likely to change in a hurry."

"Change doesn't have to be fast to be effective, as long as there is change," Hannibal says. "Stagnation is the enemy of the self, Will; a failure to develop is only another form of death, the death of your potential."

Will flops over onto his back with a dramatised groan. "It's too late for me to be debating you in trait theory and mutability."

“Perhaps we should save it for our next office session,” Hannibal smiles gently. “For now, I can simply appreciate having you in my bed.”

“It’s actually getting kind of late for that too,” Will says, and he heaves himself upright, reaching for his jacket spread on the nearby floor. There are tissues in the pocket somewhere; he can wipe up the worst of the mess so he doesn’t drip on the rug on his way to the bathroom.

“You don’t wish to stay?”

There’s an acid needle of rejection strung beneath Hannibal’s words, hanging on the thinnest of cords like spider silk, and Will looks back over his shoulder to find his eyes in the half-light, apologetic. “I have to go back to the dogs. Let them out.”

Hannibal’s quiet is a momentary thing, but long enough to reveal the consideration he’s giving to his next words. “Was this a clutch for balance, Will? It would be understandable, if so. Abigail and I have certainly thrust you askew this evening.”

What was it? It’s a hard question for Will to answer when he doesn’t know himself.

He knows it wasn’t just a flash of desperation or hurt. “This is me enjoying your company and finding you attractive,” he says, and the switch in tense is deliberately chosen, because it matters.

The lines soften around Hannibal’s mouth and he lays a hand to Will’s thigh. “Would you have dinner with me again tomorrow evening?”

It could be moving a little fast, but his romantic relationships have never lasted more than a few months, so maybe he should just grab what he can while it’s here.

“Yeah, I’d like that,” he says, and he rests his hand briefly over Hannibal’s before he goes back to the tissue hunt.

The river is wide, its course gentle and slow as it winds through the forest towards the sea.

Its surface gleams silver, mirror-like in the sun, its banks dappled by the overhanging branches. The pools at its edges are dark and deep. Enticing.

A light breeze dances over his skin; the summer air is mellow and rich with the scent of soil and leaves. The path is smooth underfoot, well-worn as it curves with the path of the river, and his feet follow it at a pace as relaxed as the day. No charge, no urgency, there’s only the comfort of the journey, and the end will come in its own time.

The man alongside him keeps time, their steps as perfectly matched as their mood. His company is welcome, his presence on Will’s skin and in his head as soft as the shifts of the wind. Will doesn’t

know when he appeared; he may always have been there.

That feels right.

The path widens into an open glade, a space between the trees where the grass grows long and lush and shimmers in the beams of light. Cassie Boyle lies stretched across her rack of antlers, her arms splayed wide to welcome the sun that sends fingers down through her hair. Her limbs are delicate as porcelain, her skin smooth and china-pale, accented by the delicate trails of blood that emerge with the point of each time. Cassie's eyes are closed, but those of her stag's head follow them as they pass by, watchful, preserving her and keeping her safe in her perfection.

He strolls on through the glade, his companion always beside him; he lifts his face into the warmth, the wind ruffling through his curls and sensitising his scalp. As the trail meanders back into the woods, one tree stands apart – a mature laurel oak with branches reaching high to form clouds of green against the rich summer sky.

Marissa Schurr hangs from the strength of its trunk, mounted on antlers which in turn are bound deep into the bark. Her forearms drape lightly across the upper arcs of bone, while the lower set pierce deep through her thorax and emerge from her belly, supporting her weight. There's no risk she will ever fall. Her legs stretch towards the earth, her toes resting inches above the soil that might otherwise ruin her. The thick curtain of Marissa's hair protects her face and the lowest branches of the oak shield her, the leaves of her guardian rustling around her.

She's at home here, immortalised in the permanence of the forest instead of hidden within the walls of a dark cabin. Her beauty deserves to be shared.

The path beckons them onwards, and he greets the enclosing shade with pleasure after the luminous interlude of the sun. His companion moves closer as the undergrowth thickens around them, their arms brushing together with each step. The river is a ribbon of light glimpsed through the dense limbs of the trees, always within sight but never within reach, and the rush of the wind through branches grows loud above them.

They follow the trail and the walking is timeless. The day doesn't feel rushed, but it's already evening, the sun hanging below the treetops when they enter another, smaller gap in the woods. There's no rich carpet of sweet-smelling grass here, only compacted dirt and broken concrete, a few weeds struggling to break through the cracks. And there's the nurse.

The nurse from the Baltimore State Hospital. He never knew her name. He never saw her, but he *saw* her and he knows her now. She dangles, speared through by metal that glares in a stray beam of sunlight, low through the trees. Each makeshift, mismatched spike through her torso is angled differently from the others, criss-crossed abstractly without order or thought. He sees no pattern or purpose beyond the urge to make a hole, and her blood lies pooled where it happened to land.

She's not natural.

She's not beautiful.

He picks up his pace, leaving her behind, and his companion matches him, stays with him as they move on into the refuge of the trees.

The light is fading, more so beneath the arching branches, but dusk doesn't change his serenity in the journey. The sky is clear, and there's nothing to fear in the approach of night. It will be vibrant

with the scattered brilliance of the stars.

They arrive at the third glade with the sunset, and this time the girl in it pushes herself up from her seat in the grass and turns to greet them with a smile. She's not wearing her scarf tonight and her hair's tucked back behind her ear; she's unashamed of the thin, raised line that curves around her neck and he delights in her confidence, her acceptance.

He's holding a knife, and so is his companion. The handle is wood, nestled smooth and comfortable within the curl of his palm.

They reach for her together, drawing their blades across her throat side by side, and they do it with love.

There's no fountain of arterial blood, no gasping, choking panic in her eyes. Her skin parts with only a slow trickle of red, and it peels back and away from the original incisions they made, splitting to reveal another, different surface underneath. She reaches up to the edges, hastening the process, stripping the epidermis with her fingernails to reveal her true self below it.

Her original shell slips downwards, shed like a layer of unwanted clothing until she steps free of it, glistening in the last of the light. Her mature form is dark like the approaching gloom and she's momentarily weak from the stresses of change. They enfold her between them, her head tucked against his neck, her antlers resting over his shoulder.

She trembles against him, this newly made Abigail, a daughter to be protected, to be nurtured and strengthened, and his eyes lift to meet the face of his companion. Acknowledging his onyx skin, his majestic crown of branching bone, the bottomless warmth of his ebony gaze.

Will sees himself reflected in the black of Hannibal's eyes, sees himself bare and obsidian and familiar.

He disentangles himself from Abigail, taking her hand instead, and on her other side, Hannibal does the same.

The three of them walk the path together to meet the night.

Chapter 5

He's sprawled across his floor the next morning, working on a boat motor, when he hears it. A desolate whining, something tortured, drawn out and lingering. A sound of emptiness and torment echoing across the barren fields, accompanied by snapping and snarls.

It's not like any coyote he's ever heard, but he can't think what else it could be.

He doesn't see anything unusual when he looks outside. The dogs sniff around here and there, interested but not frantic.

He goes back indoors and picks up his phone. His fingers hover over the list of names, scrolling up and down through the letters more than once.

He calls Alana.

They don't find anything when they sweep the fields. No animal prints, no trace of a predator's kill. It's a good morning for a walk, at least, bright and windless with only a light coating of overnight snow.

It's odd being out here without the dogs, but Alana's agreeable to be around – she always is. And she looks great in a fitted coat and colourful scarf, her curls sweeping down over her shoulders.

They head back towards the house, the conversation about coyotes and injured animals dying down when they give up the search. The air's pleasingly frosty on his skin – he'd been feeling a little overheated indoors, maybe he shouldn't have stacked the fire so high.
Alana picks her way between the tall clumps of grass and angles a curious look at him past the fall of her hair. "Jack tells me you've been spending a lot of time with Hannibal."

Jack's still keeping tabs on him, then, assessing his mental state from a distance. No big surprise there. "I don't believe that's any of Jack's business."

"Well, it isn't," she says easily. "We're your friends, Will, we like to know what's going on in your life."

"I'm not sure there's anything 'going on'," he says, heavy emphasis on the quote. They had sex, once. That doesn't make it a thing. "We're both spending a lot of time with Abigail."

"Abigail isn't always with you," she points out. "Sometimes it's just the two of you."

She knows exactly when Hannibal signs Abigail out of the facility, and when he doesn't. It's her job to know it. "Hannibal's good at conversation and he's a great cook. I like his company."

"There's a lot there to like," Alana says with a smile, and then her face straightens into seriousness again. "We introduced you to Hannibal in a professional capacity, Will."

So that's where this is going. "He wrote one evaluation on me, Alana, a report that concluded I could deal with field work. I decided that evaluation was premature and opted out."

She stops walking, touches a hand lightly to his sleeve so that he does the same. "Do you still see him at his office?"

Will shrugs, looking out over the fields to the horizon. "It's kind of a habit to meet there, but it's not therapy. We just talk."

"I think you should make a new habit of meeting somewhere else." Her words are just a whisker slower than usual – she's choosing with tact and care. "I wouldn't want things to get difficult for Hannibal with the board."

She's right. She often is. He can't put Hannibal at risk over something as stupid as his name written in the ledger. "Yeah, okay." He's meeting her eyes for the first time this whole conversation. "We'll do that."

"Good." She smiles and pushes her hands into the pockets of her coat, then starts walking towards the house again. He falls back in alongside her, their elbows brushing with each step, and she throws him a sideways glance that's almost flirtatious. "You know, I've heard before that opposites attract. I never thought I'd see it demonstrated so effectively."

"We're not opposites," Will says, the reaction instant, because all the ways they are, those are superficial things, not the ones that matter.

"So, what are you then?" she asks, and her smile says she's teasing, but he doesn't have an answer for her either way.

The next evening finds Will on Hannibal's doorstep again.

He reaches for the bell, hesitates, tugs at his collar and gives himself another check over for dog hair.

It's ridiculous, he knows that. He's been coming here for dinner for weeks; he was here only last night. It's too late now to worry about what kind of impression he might be making, when he didn't really bother before.

Hannibal will appreciate it if he looks like he made an effort, though. He notices the details. It doesn't have to be anything dramatic, but he'll like knowing that this matters to Will, that he's willing to invest some time in this relationship.

If it is a relationship. It might not be. Yet.

It can be. He's seen it, the extent of Hannibal's hunger, glimpsed the sharp points of its teeth through the cracks in Hannibal's walls.

He's over-thinking it. He always does. It's too easy to lose himself in what his partner's looking for instead of what works for them, together.

He doesn't want to do that this time. If Hannibal's okay with everything he's seen of Will, Will can be okay with himself.

He rings the doorbell.

"Will." Hannibal's already smiling when he opens the door, the light from the house spilling around him into the night. "I'm delighted you could make it."

He looks immaculate. He always does. No jacket, because he's been cooking, and his shirt sleeves are rolled to just below his elbows, but his silk waistcoat is crease-free and his hair's slicked across in a perfect parting. "Come on through to the kitchen, I'll pour you some wine."

Hannibal's manners are as impeccable as his grooming, and Will knows exactly how this will go. Hannibal will make them a fabulous, multi-course dinner; they'll have long conversations about philosophy and history, about murder and motives and morality. They'll be watching each other across the table with every bite, every swallow, every sip at a wine glass, with Will wondering each second if Hannibal wants to finish up and move on to the part where they have sex as much as he does.

He can see it all, can already feel the building, singing, hours-long tension of it, and he'd rather pass.

He plants his hands on Hannibal's chest, presses him up against the wall right there in his hallway and kisses him. He kisses him thoroughly and it's slightly messy, and he doesn't give a damn if it's inelegant because it's what he wants to do. Hannibal could use a dose of inelegance now and then anyway.

And maybe Hannibal does want it as much as he does, because he's not just kissing back, wet and hungry, he's already fully hard beneath those wool pants; he was thinking about this before Will even arrived.

He has Hannibal pinned to the wall, pushing in against him rough and needy, and shit, maybe it's a bit too much, or a lot too much; he didn't even bother to say hello, just grabbed him and started sucking on his lips, and he hesitates and eases away, giving Hannibal space.

"Don't hold back, Will," Hannibal says instantly, and his eyes are black and depthless and absorbing. "Let go and be yourself."

He means it, every word of it, and the image sings through Will like a whiskey shot. "I'd love some wine, later." Will's hand drops down to where the fabric stretches at Hannibal's groin, holding

pressure there, light and steady. “First I want to suck you off.”

“I have no objections,” Hannibal assures him, and his fingers rest heavy on Will’s hips. “You may do anything you wish.”

“That’s a dangerous statement, Doctor,” Will teases, but he’s peeling open the button and zipper of Hannibal’s pants, feeling the heat through his underwear where it clings soft over the shape of him.

He eases down to his knees, and Hannibal’s touch slides over his coat and ends at his jaw. His hand lifts Will’s chin to find his eyes. “Dangerous things are among the most beautiful in the world, Will. Do we not honour the majesty of the stalking tiger, his cunning and strength as he leaps from the grass in ambush?”

“I might be thinking something else if he was leaping at me,” Will says with a flashed grin, but it’s not a denial. Right now, though, he’s more interested in the allure of the man staring down at him.

“If we fear every possible consequence of danger, we are fearful of life,” Hannibal says gently, and Will knows it’s true, because he’s here on his knees risking *this* with Hannibal, for the small chance that it won’t slip from his hands and shatter.

He lifts the edge of the fabric, pushing it down and away, freeing Hannibal’s cock. It rises from a dense patch of hair, neatly shaped at the edges; its length is generous, but not daunting. Will pushes his nose in beside it, skin brushing on skin, breathing the thick, musky sweat of him.

Last night was a hurried thing, clutching and grasping, immediate and demanding. This time he can take it slower, with more technique, make it better.

He opens his lips and teeth, dips low to take in one of Hannibal’s balls, sucking him light and slow within the warmth of his mouth. He closes his eyes, swirls his tongue around the softness of flesh, the taste of him sweeping through his mouth and down into his throat. Hears the quick inhale of Hannibal’s breath, feels the fingers tighten in his curls and drag against his scalp, desire surging both through him and into him, an indistinguishable flood of mutual greed.

He lets Hannibal slide out from between his lips and licks a wide, lingering stripe up the shaft of his cock, stopping before he meets the slick trail of his pre-come, the shining softness of the head. He reaches into the pocket of his jacket for the condoms he bought earlier today. Slides one out of the box that’s already open, because precautions always include a moment of fumbling that’s not remotely romantic or sexy, and he planned ahead to minimise the packaging he has to get through.

The fragrance flares heavy in his nose as he drops the packet to the floor, and Hannibal doesn’t say anything about Will’s choice, but he doesn’t have to. The lift of his eyebrow is more than enough.

“I know, I know,” Will says. “They don’t taste much like strawberries, but it’s an improvement over raw latex.” He’s always enjoyed giving oral sex, indulging in the responses of his partner, though there’s not much innate appeal in sucking on a condom.

He peels the rubber free and rolls it carefully along the length of Hannibal’s erection. It’s a bit too big, but that’s okay for oral – better too big than too small in this case. He squeezes gently around the base of Hannibal’s cock and looks up at him with a smile. “Sorry if I’m ruining dinner.” He’s not, not at all, but it’s the right thing to say. There’s a rich, meaty aroma spilling down the hallway from the kitchen, heavy and enticing as the scent that clings to Hannibal’s groin.

The hand that isn't tangled in Will's hair brushes soft along the curve of his neck. "Fortunately, I chose today to serve us a slow-cooked pork dish. It's been baking for six hours, it will take no harm from one more."

Will slants wicked eyes upwards through his lashes. "You think it will take me an hour to get you off?"

"The struggle will be to maintain my dignity for longer than ten minutes. The side dishes may suffer from our delay, though, and will need to be replaced."

Will tilts his head dramatically in studied consideration. "That sounds like an acceptable sacrifice."

Hannibal's lips twitch at the edges and he combs lazy fingers through Will's curls. "Very much so."

There's no more talking then as Will opens his mouth to fake strawberries and the heavy heat of Hannibal's cock.

He hasn't done this in years, but he's meticulously detail-oriented and he has an excellent memory for things that interest him. He holds the condom secure at the base with one hand, his lips and tongue wrapping around Hannibal's flesh, flexibility and pressure variation the key to maximising stimulation through a layer of latex.

He pushes Hannibal's pants and underwear down past his thighs as he works, uses his free hand to stroke over the curve of his ass, shaped and firmed by exercise. He can't taste Hannibal, can't sweep his tongue through his pre-come and slick up his silky head and shaft with his own saliva, but he can touch Hannibal; he can trace patterns over the sensitive areas of his skin, can hold him in place and work fingers into the depth of his muscles. He can and he wants to and he will.

He can ease his fingers gently between Hannibal's cheeks, stroke the pad of his thumb over the bunched, twitching flesh of his perineum. Can hear Hannibal's breath catch in a rush and sigh out long, can feel him press further into Will's mouth, the eagerness of him thrumming through every point of contact, can feel the taut effort of restraint as Hannibal leashes the urge to grab Will and fuck his lips. He can feel the thrumming of blood in the thick vein of Hannibal's cock, even through the condom, and he slides his tongue over the head and the sensitive ridge, then dives deep and swallows around him, swallows the thick, strawberry tang of his own saliva and inhales the salt, musky scent of the man.

He hears Hannibal's breathing speed as he grows closer, feels the pressure build in his own cock pressed tight against the fabric of his briefs as Hannibal's clawing lust flares bright through his mind. Hannibal's hand tightens in his hair, nails scraping over his scalp, and he pushes Hannibal more firmly against the wall, holding him in place as he sucks and sucks and strokes lightly over his balls with his other hand, until Hannibal pants and shivers and grabs at Will's shoulder, his fingers clenching tight over the bone when he comes.

Will gasps around the stretch of Hannibal's cock and braces through the tremors of his own muscles, the physical mirroring inevitable with the intensity of his partner's orgasm resonating in his head. He can *feel* himself climax in that shared, fleeting instant, though the sensation fades rapidly without the lingering come-down, and his erection's still full and tugging at his attention.

He loosens his lips, holding Hannibal gently within the warmth of his mouth while the grip on his shoulder eases and Hannibal's breathing lightens. He pulls away then, needing to deal with the condom before Hannibal softens and there's any risk of spillage.

Hannibal's hand strokes up his neck and along his jaw as Will rolls off the latex, and Will looks up to find his eyes, heavy-lidded and bleeding contentment. "Would you come up to the bedroom with me, Will? I'd like to see you resting on a surface more comfortable than the floor while I return the favour."

He'll go anywhere with Hannibal if he's offering to blow him. He has the most delectably shaped mouth, a protruding, pouty upper lip that Will's been surreptitiously not noticing for months. "Should I bring these?" He gestures at the condom packet on the floor beside him.

"I'll have to try them, since you've demonstrated such admirable forethought," Hannibal smiles, and that doesn't *necessarily* mean Hannibal doesn't keep condoms in his house in case he finds someone to fuck, but Will doesn't think he'd be volunteering to suck on fake strawberries if there was a reasonable alternative nearby.

He likes the idea that Hannibal might not do this much, that it's not passingly casual.

He follows Hannibal up the stairs and drops the tied off condom in the trashcan in the corner of the bedroom. His next move's towards the bathroom to wash his hands, but Hannibal's turning him and kissing him, open-mouthed and wet, and he's dragging the jacket from Will's shoulders.

If this is the way it's starting, Will can *definitely* play the game. It's not about finesse this time, using technique and pleasing his partner, it's about what *he* wants.

His jacket's pushed away, freeing his arms, and he makes a grab for Hannibal's pants. He'd replaced his clothing to walk upstairs, and Will's not being delicate now, tugging the button from its hole and yanking on the zipper before he shoves everything down to his ankles. His hands are up under Hannibal's shirt, rubbing firm over his abdomen and curling into the hair that sprawls over his pectorals.

Most of Hannibal is so perfectly groomed, and Will loves finding this part of him left wild. He hikes the shirt up towards Hannibal's neck, uncaring of buttons or wrinkles, and he breaks the connection of their mouths so he can drop his head and suck along the exposed lines of his chest.

Last night was the first time in a while, the first time with someone new, and he'd thought maybe the intensity was the surprise, the novelty, the speed of it.

It's not. The intensity is Hannibal and the lust looping between them, the feedback of Hannibal's hunger flaring as fierce as his own. The intensity is Hannibal and the way he encourages him, the suggestion that he'll let Will do *anything* and delight in the result.

The intensity is recklessness and need and having his hands and his mouth everywhere on Hannibal's skin. Hannibal hasn't even *done* anything but kiss him and Will's already grinding up against him, pressing his erection into the firm meat of Hannibal's thigh. It would be embarrassing if Hannibal wasn't giving it back as hard as he's taking it, stripping Will of his clothes with near-ruthless efficiency and running his hands over every inch of skin he exposes. Will's chest is bare, shirt hanging from his shoulders, his legs are bare, with his pants tangled below his knees; the air's chill over his sweat where he's not wound around Hannibal, and his cock's hard and slick in the damp warmth where they push together. Hannibal's only half hard, it's all he can be, but it doesn't matter because he still wants Will, wants Will to *want* him, it's blatant in every movement of his body, of his hands, in the lamp-reflecting stare of his eyes.

Will sets his hands on Hannibal's shoulders and Hannibal yields to the pressure, sinking down onto the bed behind him.

There's a natural pause then, a shifting down of gears, because the condoms are in the pocket of Will's discarded jacket, and they're not going much further without them. "We didn't plan this out too well," Will says with a quick, crooked smile.

There's no coffee-mellow in Hannibal's gaze now, only the swirling depths of hunger. "I disagree, I believe everything's going perfectly," he says, and he pulls Will down for a kiss that's heavy and long before releasing him.

Will toes out of the fabric pooled around his feet to retrieve the box, and they both take the opportunity to shed their socks. Then he's back by the bed, pushing Hannibal down all the way, and he drapes himself over the length of him, gravity tugging them close, all bare skin and sweat and lips, kissing and seeking.

He doesn't resist when Hannibal rolls them, settling onto the bedspread with his legs parted wide, because he really would like that blow job now. He has his hands on Hannibal's thighs, stroking over the rough hair while Hannibal unwraps the condom, curling his fingers into the skin when Hannibal rolls it onto him, a firm, sliding, pressure along his shaft.

Hannibal reaches into the nightstand and brings out a bottle that must be lube. "Do you enjoy anal stimulation with oral sex, Will?"

"A finger's good at first. After a point, it gets too distracting and I finish better without."

Hannibal trails a finger along Will's lip, watching him with parted lips. "Maybe I'd prefer you not to finish quickly."

Will gives him a wide, deliberately toothy grin. "Then you'll get to choose between that and dinner."

Hannibal leans in, all breath and tongue, a heady warmth over his thigh. "You make an admirable point, as always. Would you like me to wear a glove?"

Gloves make him think of work and all kinds of things he'd never want to touch. "Not if you're okay without."

There are degrees of safe sex, and some risks are small enough to live with. He can't have Hannibal's tongue on his cock or his ass, but he can have his finger buried inside him, and he wants all the direct contact he can get.

Hannibal hmms in reply, a vibration against Will's hip and a distinctly pleased tone that leaves him thinking maybe Hannibal likes the contact too. And then there's contact, *oh* there's contact, Hannibal's lips wrapping around him and starting to suck, firm and rhythmic through the condom.

Even in the subdued light, Will can catch the flicker across Hannibal's face. "I warned you it wouldn't appeal to your palate."

Hannibal pulls back to meet Will's eyes, runs his tongue across his lower lip, leaving a shining trail. "The formula could doubtless be improved, but I imagine any flavour would be unsatisfying when it prohibits tasting you."

There's something more than hungry in there, something almost greedy, and definitely enticing as his eyes momentarily seem to swell and blacken, but the sentiment's wholly impractical, and Will's not going to answer it now because he wants Hannibal's mouth on his cock rather than talking. And that's where Hannibal puts it, taking him in past the head, his tongue flicking and lapping over the sensitive ridges, and Will regularly enjoys masturbation but an enthusiastic blow job is maybe a hundred times *better*.

He's boneless and mindless, utterly relaxed with Hannibal's bedspread wrinkled soft beneath his back, and Hannibal pops the cap from the lube with a soft click while he sucks. Will lifts his knees, opening his thighs further; Hannibal's fingers curl beneath his balls, lifting them, and he's ready for that cool, slick touch brushing over him, sliding into him, sighing into the sensation and the deep, pressing intimacy of it. Hannibal's as skilled with his tongue on Will's cock as he is wielding it in conversation, but he might be even more talented with his hand, stroking and teasing, steady and building.

He pulls away briefly, the sucking warmth abruptly gone from around the condom. "Let me know when you'd like me to stop," he says, and then falls back into the rhythm of it, his hand on the base of Will's cock, his lips wrapped around the head, his fingers sinking inside him.

Will breathes into the stretch, shifts his hips for easier access and a better angle. "That might not be for a while."

But he's been hard for so long, since he dropped to his knees in the hallway, and everything's heightened through his head and through his body, and Hannibal's spiking thrills along his nerves with his mouth and his grip, until he's quivering with the intensity and it's almost too much and he just wants to *come*.

His hand sweeps back behind Hannibal's ear, curling and tightening, and, "Okay, just –" and he doesn't need to say more because Hannibal gets it, the fingers easing away. And then it's all touch on his balls and grasp and slide around the base of his cock and the swirl of that tongue around him, tugging him on and on. His fingers are tangled in the strands of Hannibal's hair, he's pushing into the heat and sucking pressure of Hannibal's mouth, delicious and perfect, his body's thrumming with the pleasure, with the heady drive of it, with the sweep of Hannibal's tongue around him, and he's still not *there.* Everything's close and closing in further, focus narrowed only to the physical, to the touch, to the always-sharpening need, and it's right there before him, at the tip of his cock and down into his balls, tangible and heavy, and still he has to strain to chase it, his muscles taut, his hips flexing, nudging deeper for what he's seeking, until finally, *finally* he makes it, and shudders into orgasm.

He's lying sprawled, limp and panting, and when he drags himself back into full awareness, Hannibal's already rolling the condom away and knotting it, efficient and precise.

He should apologise. He should, because he got kind of rough at the end there, grabbing at hair and pressing in further than Hannibal might have wanted him.

He should, but he doesn't, because there's no shadow of regret or disenchantment drawn over Hannibal's face; there's only the protracted flush of delight and satisfaction, perhaps even closer to vindication.

Hannibal doesn't move to get up or dispose of the rubber. He sprawls alongside Will, propped on one elbow, lets his gaze wander the length of Will's naked body and back up to his eyes with the subtlest of smiles. "You have admirable self-restraint, Will."

Will's sure it wasn't self-control holding off his orgasm. He's sweaty and flushed from being so turned on, so worked up for so long, and he felt like he needed to come for years, suspended right on the edge of it; he just couldn't quite make it over and let himself fall.

He hopes he's not adding sexual dysfunction to his list of issues. That would be the perfect thing to discover now he's got this thing going on with Hannibal. At least he's not having any problems actually getting hard; that part happens fast enough.

He grabs Hannibal by the shoulder and flips him onto his back, rolling on top to pin him and kiss him enthusiastically before he answers. He still tastes of not-strawberries from sucking Will off. "Well, it's definitely not lack of enthusiasm. I have plenty of that."

Hannibal reaches up to stroke a hand along his cheekbone and back into the curls at his temple. "I told you that the one time you revealed your true self was when you opened your mind to a killer," he says. "It seems I was mistaken. Your sexuality is as much a key to your elemental drives."

Will smiles down at him, deliberately relaxing his grip on Hannibal's collarbone. "I'm not usually this pushy."

"You've been less forward with your previous lovers?"

He feels his own smile dissolve, melting away from his face. "I tried to be what they wanted me to be." Tried to be acceptable, to be a semblance of 'normal'.

"And with me?" Hannibal's entirely serious now, his eyes searching Will for every level of response.

The only way to answer is honestly. "You said you wanted to see more of me. You want me to be what I want to be."

"We're compatible."

It's too early to make that leap, but Will doesn't veil the desire in his eyes when he replies. "I hope so."

Will's never dated anyone who encouraged him to be authentic. He's dated people who liked his reticence, his emotional distancing, because they shared it, whether from personal inclination or some past trauma. They didn't like it when he leaked, when they leaked, when he knew so much more about them than he should.

He's dated (when he was younger and didn't know better, and only ever briefly) people who saw him as a challenge or a project, people who wanted to 'fix' him. He would have laughed at the vast, galaxy-wide impossibility of that, if the gaping expanse of it wasn't so achingly painful.

Hannibal's looking up at him with an affection targeted entirely to Will, and he sees nothing in him to fix.

Chapter 6

Hannibal was right about the sides; they're sitting on the countertop, cold and congealed and sad in their serving dishes.

Will would have microwaved them. Hannibal insists they can't be salvaged to his standards, but a fresh salad will be a perfectly acceptable substitute.

Will pours their delayed glasses of wine while Hannibal mixes lime and honey and more things Will doesn't bother to investigate into olive oil. He replenishes the fading fire in the dining room, and Hannibal plucks and tosses leaves, then retrieves the source of that rich, meaty aroma from the oven. The slow-cooked pork is unbelievably tender, falling into individual strands with the slightest tug of a fork.

Will sits at the table, languid with really, really enjoyable sex, sharing delicious food and intelligent conversation with the enticing man opposite, and he can't imagine there's an evening that might be more enjoyable than this.

He waits until Hannibal's served dessert before he raises the subject that might add the final frisson, the powdered sugar glittering over the circle of his Paris-Brest. "Have you heard anything new from Jack recently?"

Hannibal's mouth closes around another bite of his pastry. Will watches the bob of his throat as he swallows, flush with the memory of having him swallow around his erection. "He has offered up no more murderers to challenge us," Hannibal says, and Will feels the slow slither of disappointment slinking down through his belly. "He has been keen to discuss other matters with me, however, including the effects of your sabbatical from the BSU, and when you might feel inclined to return."

"I gleaned that much from Alana this morning." Will stabs into the creamy confection before him, shattering its symmetry. "I'll buy the well-meaning friend angle from her, not so much from Jack."

Hannibal's fork hesitates in the air. "Alana came to visit you?"

There's a brittle edge creeping around the words, and Will doesn't want Hannibal thinking she's *interested* in him. They've spent too much time avoiding being alone together for that to be a possibility. "I called her. I thought I heard an injured coyote and I wanted help if I found it."

Hannibal's held tilts, that fast, hawkish instinct. "You thought you heard it?"

Trust Hannibal to latch onto the one word Will had wanted to slip by him. "There was no sign of it when we got out there, no blood or tracks," he admits.

If anything, Hannibal's gaze is even sharper, though his words are gentle. "Did your dogs react when you heard its cries, Will?"

Will looks down to his plate, to the delicate pastry flaking around the tines of his fork. If he tells the truth, he might ruin this. If he lies and Hannibal knows, he'll ruin this.

The words from last night, another moment in subtly lit darkness. *'I don't wish to lie to you, even lies of omission.'*

“No,” Will says quietly. “They were resting.”

“You already suspected what you heard might not be real.”

It’s not a question, and Will can’t deny it anyway. “Yes.”

“You called Alana instead of me.”

There’s no missing the acid taint in Hannibal’s words and Will looks up, giving Hannibal a bitter, crooked smile. “I didn’t want you to think I’m crazy.”

Hannibal’s eyes soften instantly to a mellow chestnut-brown, and he reaches across the table to cover Will’s hand with his own. “I promise you, I will never believe you are crazy, Will,” he says. “I want you to know that you can always come to me. Don’t let the change in our relationship affect that.”

Hannibal’s sincerity radiates around him, bright as the stars across the vacuum of space, but Will knows it’s too much to ask. He can’t expect the first, exploring green shoots of a relationship to withstand the trampling buffalo of a mental breakdown.

He turns his hand beneath Hannibal’s, laces their fingers together and holds on tight.

It should be embarrassing, but he doesn’t let go, and he finishes the last few bites of his dessert with his other hand.

Hannibal doesn’t pull away either, his eyes resting on Will the whole time.

Their plates are empty of the last traces of choux, and Hannibal strokes his thumb lightly over Will’s knuckle. “Did you make arrangements for the dogs tonight? I’d love to prepare you breakfast.”

He could invent a half-honest reason, say it was too short notice, that nobody he trusts was available, but he knows he’ll soon run out of excuses. “I sweat. A lot.” He feels his own face twist with the depth of the understatement. “It’s not pleasant, even for me.”

That head tilt again, the quick flare of professional interest. “Are you still having the same dreams, Will?”

There’s interest, yes, the curiosity that Hannibal had admitted from the start he would never be able to suppress. But there are layers and nuance to Hannibal’s expression, a bubbling undercurrent of genuine concern that negates Will’s instinctive reaction to evade scrutiny. “Not the same,” he admits. “They’re getting stranger.” He doesn’t have a better word for them, that recurrent combination of unfettered violence and sweetly comforting familiarity.

“Is the sweating a new symptom?”

A pause, because Will has to think about that one – it’s hard to pin down a specific time when he didn’t, but he *knows* that he didn’t. “Kind of?” he offers. “It’s been over a month now.”

Hannibal’s fingers curl more tightly around Will’s. “There may be more to your symptoms than mental trauma,” he says carefully. “Perhaps you should be checked by a physician. I have a neurologist acquaintance who would see you if I ask.”

“I’m not fond of doctors.” Too many hours being prodded inside and out during his teenage years left him with a dislike of the entire medical field.

Another comforting squeeze of pressure. “Surely you would want to know if there’s something wrong that could be easily fixed.”

“And what if there’s not? What if your neurologist finds everything’s normal?” He doesn’t need to ask what it will mean if he really is crazy. Hannibal can see that fear in him.

“Then we’ll continue to work with any psychological issues. But I believe it would be prudent to rule out a physical cause first.”

Hannibal’s serene and confident, his eyes steady, no flicker of doubt or hesitation anywhere on his features. Will wasn’t expecting to find reassurance in this conversation, but somehow he is. “Okay. I guess that makes sense.”

“I’ll talk with Doctor Sutcliffe and determine when he would be able to meet with you.” Hannibal takes a sip of wine and he’s smiling at him over the rim of the glass, and the last of the awkwardness evaporates. It’s only the two of them with the lingering sweetness of dessert, the crackling of the firewood and the mellow wash of alcohol suffusing the room.

Hannibal rises from his seat, but he doesn’t move to collect the plates and clear the table. Instead, he walks around behind Will and places a hand lightly on his shoulder. “Would you like to come back to bed for a while before you leave? Or is it mandatory for our physical liaisons to begin out in the hallway?”

The pressure’s light, but Will can still feel the touch and the heat of him through the layers of fabric. He tilts his head back, peering upwards with carefully angled eyes. “If you don’t want to be attacked in your hallway, you shouldn’t look so good in rolled up sleeves.”

“I’ve no objections to being attacked in my hallway,” Hannibal assures him. “I only need to determine how I might go about triggering such a reaction in a different part of the house.”

Will pushes his chair back from the table and gives him a wide, lazy smile. “Maybe you could start by taking off that jacket.”

Hannibal calls half way through the day, when Will’s on his break between classes. “I’ve arranged for Doctor Sutcliffe to see you later at Johns Hopkins. The MRI machine will be available too, should he decide it’s medically advisable.”

His students have been demanding and it’s not enough notice and Will bristles, a sensation of Buster with his hackles spiked when he smells a coyote. “I’m teaching today. I can’t just drop everything and leave.”

“I’ve scheduled you to see him at seven-thirty, instead of our session,” Hannibal says. “I hope you weren’t planning to violate my twenty-four hour cancellation policy again. I usually charge for a second offence.” His dry humour sings through the connection, light and vibrant in Will’s ear.

Hannibal’s not being a controlling asshole, expecting Will to rearrange his life when he phones. He just… cares.

He wants Will to be seen and he was thoughtful about it, and it’s oddly nice. “Okay. I’ll be there.” It’s a good thing anyway - he should have talked to Hannibal last night about Alana’s suggestion of changing the weekly appointment at the office, but he’d been distracted in all kinds of ways.

“I’d very much like to accompany you. If you don’t mind, of course.”

“No, it’s good. I’d like you to come.” Strangely it’s true, not just something he ought to say to a lover.

“Perhaps we could have dinner afterwards. It may be too late for me to cook, but there are some tolerable restaurants not far from the hospital.”

Hannibal’s idea of tolerable probably beats most meals Will’s ever eaten. “That sounds great.” He hesitates, mentally rehearsing the words, needing it to sound sincere and not rote. “Thank you for arranging this.”

Hannibal doesn’t acknowledge it directly, but there’s candid pleasure in his voice, a warmth that laps around Will’s feet like a gentle surf. “I’ll meet you in the lobby at seven-twenty.”

The MRI machine is restrictive and loud – the heavy thumps reverberate through his head almost more than his ears, and the earplugs aren’t doing much to stop it.

The naproxen he swallowed with lunch had banished his earlier headache. He figures it’ll be back by the time this is done.

He closes his eyes to shut it all out, trying to lie as still as possible and get this over with. He can feel the vibrations through his skin, through his brain, the tension tugging on the molecules of his body with each radiomagnetic pulse.

He’s not alone in here.

His eyes snap open when the awareness hits him; his body’s tingling, almost an aura around him as the protons are dragged into artificial alignment, flashing back when they’re released.

Elliot Buddish is beside him, his black-feathered wings crossed over his chest like a shroud. There shouldn’t be room in here for two, but the curved sides of the tube have split and spread, peeling

open like a blooming flower, while the mechanical thuds recede, still present, but distant.

Buddish's eyes are fixed, waiting. No need to blink for the dead, for the immortal, and Will can't think to look away.

"Did you decide?" Buddish's voice is nothing like the remote, echoing thud of the machine. He's right there, inches away, and his words resonate with closeness, with intimacy. "Have you chosen fear?"

"I haven't chosen anything. I'm getting on with my life."

"A life you don't enjoy."

Will's lips twist at that. "Does anybody?" He peers narrow-eyed into Buddish's serene stare. "Did you?"

Buddish nods his head, slow and deliberate. "Sometimes. Before I let fear ruin me."

Will's breath leaves his lungs in a rush that doesn't quite shape a laugh. "A brain tumour ruined you."

Buddish lifts one expansive wing, raising it to form an immense arch, filling the space where the roof of the machine has peeled away. It sweeps overhead, casting them into the darkest shadow and somehow offering protection in concert. "The tumour changed me. The fear of change ruined me."

"You were scared of dying," Will says. "That's normal."

"You're scared of living. Is that normal?"

Maybe it is. Will's seen enough fear in enough people struggling to get through daily existence that he can't be sure. What proportion of people have to suffer before suffering is normal?

Buddish knows his questions, his answers, without Will needing to speak. His wing curves down again, enfolding them both, wrapping Will into the downy blackness. "I am your fear. I'm with you until you choose another path."

The rhythmic thumps of the machine fade into silence as all-consuming as the dark, and even the glint from Buddish's eyes is gone.

"Will?" A voice, someone calling him. Hannibal's voice. "Will, can you hear me?"

He blinks.

He's in the hospital. The MRI suite. Lying on the table, which is back outside the machine, with the two doctors staring down at him. "It happened again," he says. It's not even a surprise by now.

"It would seem so," Hannibal says gently.

"Do we know why? What did the scan show?"

Hannibal looks across at Doctor Sutcliffe, who gives a nod in return. "Your MRI indicates that it's likely you have encephalitis, Will."

Encephalitis. That would explain pretty much everything. Fever, headaches, dreams, hallucinations. He pushes himself upright on the table, drags a hand through the sweat-damp tangle of his curls. “What does that mean in terms of treatment?”

“We’ll need to do further tests to determine the cause, starting with a lumbar puncture to analyse your cerebrospinal fluid, and then we’ll know more. Doctor Sutcliffe is arranging to have you admitted.”

“Right now?” Shit, that won’t work. He didn’t bring anything with him, he hasn’t made arrangements for the dogs…

Hannibal’s fingers settle on Will’s thigh, warm and steadying through the flimsy cotton of the gown. “This could be serious, Will, and the longer it continues, the greater the risk of permanent damage. I can only apologise for my failure to notice sooner that your symptoms were not wholly psychological. As a physician, I’ve failed you, badly.”

Will rests his own hand over Hannibal’s, weaving their fingers together, shared comfort flowing between them as he completes the circuit. “Don’t. I wouldn’t be here now if you hadn’t arranged it.” He gives Hannibal a stretched, parched smile. “I guess this means I’ll be standing you up for dinner tonight.”

Hannibal’s hand tightens around his own. “I’m anticipating you’ll reschedule when you’re released.” He leans in and drops a kiss at Will’s temple, brief and delicate. “Don’t worry about the dogs, Will, I’ll take care of them.”

Hannibal’s done that before, he knows their routine, but neither of them have any idea how long he might be here. “You can’t keep driving out to Wolf Trap three times a day, it’s too much.”

“I can share the pet-sitting duties with Alana. Between the two of us the inconvenience will be minimal.”

Hannibal’s face is almost painfully earnest. He really means it, he *wants* to do this to help Will, and the relief coils around him, enfolding him in a blanket soft and warm. “If you’re sure you don’t mind.”

“My only concern is that you receive the treatment you need. I’ll do whatever it takes to make that happen.” Hannibal brings their clasped hands to his lips, seals another soft kiss to Will’s fingers.

There’s a weight to it, an emotional presence over every inch of Will’s body as he dives into the depths of the calm, endless ocean spread before him.

Doctor Sutcliffe returns with three sets of paperwork for him to sign, and Will had been so focussed on Hannibal, he’d barely been aware of him leaving.

He releases Hannibal’s hand, takes the offered pen and starts reading, the methodical structure of the system already rising up around him up with a mouth like a whale, ready to swallow him whole.

He spends five days in the hospital before the tests confirm the treatment's working. He's mildly achy and intermittently nauseous, and he's still on non-steroidals and anti-virals when he's released, but his temperature's normal and his white blood cell count's trending downwards.

Hannibal picks him up in the Bentley and drives him to Wolf Trap, where the dogs greet him with delighted exuberance. They've been pleased enough to have Hannibal and Alana visit to feed and walk them, but there's no doubting their preference for having Will at home.

Hannibal heats up the chicken soup he brought and makes sure Will eats it (it actually helps with the nausea; that's probably the ginger). He brushes a gentle kiss across the edge of Will's mouth as he leaves and assures him he'll be back to check on him tomorrow.

It's all so… thoughtfully domestic. Caring.

Nice.

Will almost asks him to stay, just to have him breathe alongside him, but Hannibal's done so much already; it wouldn't be fair to make him sleep with all the dog hair too.

His house has never seemed quiet or empty with so many paws and wet noses within its walls. Now Will listens to the whistle of the storm around the open chimney and he feels the vast reaches of the fields outside, the stark, leafless branches of the exposed and wind-swept bushes.

When Hannibal visits the next day, he brings Abigail with him, and she's almost as happy to see Will as the dogs were, wrapping herself around him with a quick, slightly embarrassed smile. They'd talked about Abigail visiting him in the hospital, but it's not so long since she was a patient herself, poked by tubes and surrounded by machines, and they'd decided not to expose her to that reminder.

The afternoon's grey and damp, and Hannibal convinces Will not to walk the dogs too far from the house. The pack do enough chasing around to tire themselves them out when toys are thrown for them, and Abigail is a willing volunteer to wash the mud from their coats and dry their feet when they go back inside.

Hannibal lights the fire and makes them hot chocolate that isn't from a jar, and they sit in an armchair each to drink it. The dogs sprawl all across the floor between them, apart from Zoe, who's taken the opportunity to crawl into Abigail's lap. They talk about Abigail's new tutor and her ongoing battles with statistics, and Hannibal's hand brushes Will's elbow or knee each time they're close.

Hannibal gives Will a key to his house before he drives Abigail back to Baltimore. Will's trying not to read anything into it, and Hannibal makes it easy. "I've held your key for months now, and your illness made me realise the prudence of it. If anything were to happen to me, I would want you to take care of my home."

It makes sense. Hannibal doesn't have dogs, but he has his gardens, inside and out.

After they leave, Will sleeps again. He's doing a lot of sleeping right now.

He dreams of the three of them in a forest, the high, pale light of the full moon stretching through the winter trees. They emerge into a clearing, the surrounding branches festooned with hearts, fresh and bleeding, each one strung and circled in vivid red ribbon, as gifts. They dip their heads as they walk beneath the lowest of them to avoid entangling their antlers in the display.

Hannibal and Abigail turn to him with shining eyes, silvered by reflected light, and they grasp his black and twisted hands in their own. Their gaunt dark, fingers entwine with his, supportive and tender, and Will sees in them only beauty and joy.

When he wakes, he's not writhing and sweat-soaked; he's settled beneath his covers and suffused by that same sense of peace, lingering from the dream.

It's another week before Hannibal decides Will's recovered enough that he can make the drive over to Baltimore. Hannibal sucks him off in the hallway with his back to the door, and it turns out when Will's not sick, he has absolutely zero self-restraint. Even with the barrier of the condom, he comes in maybe three minutes, and he has no problem with that at all.

Chapter 7

He wakes to the first whispers of winter's light over his face, a slow and wandering transition from unconsciousness. No restless clicking of claws on wood or tongues lapping at the water bowl, no hint of the too-familiar ache in his skull, just a lazy quiet through his mind. A lazy quiet that extends to the man sprawled beside him, his face softened and his lips slightly parted as he breathes.

Will finds he's matching his rhythm, breathing with him.

He reaches for his phone on the nightstand to make sure he hasn't missed a call or a text, and the screen is empty. Alana would let him know if there was a problem with the dogs. Silence means everything's fine.

He doesn't have to get up to feed anyone or walk them. He can just lie here, wrapped in the softest of cotton, relaxed within his body as the grey light filters through the drapes.

Hannibal's eyes are open, a gold and coffee gleam almost lost in the fall of his hair, watching from the other pillow. "Good morning, Will."

His voice rumbles with a low, dry roughness, and Will's already smiling before he answers. "Morning."

The greeting's pallid, inadequate, and Will leans forward to kiss him, light and brushing, and that feels natural. More natural when Hannibal lifts a hand to his jaw and kisses him with ardour, letting their lips press and slide.

There's no hesitation and no demand, just a steady progression as they shift closer, finding more touch and more skin. He was already part way hard from the simple blood pressure rise of waking, but this is accentuating his morning erection convincingly.

"You said you wanted to make me breakfast," Will reminds him, his tongue only a half inch from Hannibal's, and his hand glides from Hannibal's waist past his hip and onto his thigh.

"I still do," Hannibal says, "but I would very much like you to make love to me first, if that's something you would enjoy."

Will's fingers halt and tighten over the muscle. "I… yeah." 'Enjoy' might be something of an understatement. He's been fantasising about immersing himself in both Hannibal's mind and body since that first hurried bout of mutual masturbation.

He's not going to read anything into Hannibal's word choice – Hannibal's not a man who would use any of the cruder terms for what he's suggesting. "We might need some better condoms." The kind that prioritise the full range of sizes over novelty flavouring.

Hannibal combs his fingers through the curls behind Will's ear. "I took the liberty of making some purchases while you were recovering. I was hoping you would say yes."

He sits up and opens the drawer of the nightstand, taking out several boxes and laying them on the sheets. Will picks out a packet of Kimonos that he knows are sized right for him. The lube's still

there by the base of the lamp, left out from last night.

He feels like maybe he should say something, but nothing seems right, so he leans in to kiss him again instead, soft and smiling.

Sex between them has been a hungry thing until now, a creature of greed that spirals up and takes him; not just him, it takes both of them, fast and demanding, urging them to claw their way towards climax.

Will wants this time to be lazy, considerate and unashamedly caring, an encounter that's shared and savoured for more than the drive to orgasm. Hannibal *likes* it when he presses and challenges, he knows that, but variety adds layers, and Hannibal was so patient and considerate while he was ill that Will melts into the dangling urge to reciprocate. Hannibal seems to like this too, relaxed and pliable, settling back down into the sheets as they kiss and touch and the minutes stretch longer. It's sensual and sexual and Will's suffused with a low, spreading joy beneath the rising push of desire.

The desire's there, though, it won't hold back indefinitely, and he pushes away enough to take a condom from the box, his skin feeling every inch of space between them.

"Let me, Will." Hannibal's holding out his hand and Will passes him the prophylactic. He's tingling with the mental foretaste as Hannibal unwraps it from the plastic, and then Hannibal's hands are there, gentle and sure on his cock, sliding the condom slowly over the length of him, a steady pressure all the way to the base.

He doesn't have to ask how Hannibal wants it, because he's already shifting onto his back, a pillow pushed beneath his hips, his knees raised and spread. Hannibal's always so collected, so perfectly poised and mannered, Will couldn't have imagined seeing him like this, willingly exposed and open.

Will takes a moment, just looking, and then he reaches for the lube.

"I may soften at first, a purely physiological reaction," Hannibal says. "Don't let it concern you."

It's never affected Will that way, but he knows it's common enough. He reaches out a hand to brush the stray hairs back from Hannibal's eyes. "Thank you for letting me know." Will can easily read things from a partner, but it's better to have the communication.

He knows nothing of Hannibal's sexual history, but he's more than old enough to know what he likes, and he asked for this. Hannibal's relaxed, even in this position, with long, easy breaths, and he opens easily around Will's fingers.

Hannibal doesn't say anything as Will stretches him and strokes over his prostate; he only makes slight, appreciative sounds, but he doesn't close his eyes and lose himself in sensation. He keeps the visual connection; he stays with Will.

Will smears more lube over the outside of the condom and settles himself between Hannibal's raised thighs. "Okay?"

"Please, Will."

And somehow, that word, that Hannibal says 'please' and not 'yes' or 'go ahead,' it brings a knowledge so sharp it almost stabs, because Hannibal wants this, he wants Will, wants this gentle

mood that Will's chosen and *oh* –

Hannibal's lying beneath him, looking up with eyes that are still saying, 'Please,' and waiting for Will, and okay, now, now's good, and maybe thinking's for later, after he's….

He settles the tip of his cock against Hannibal's hole and *pushes* –

Hannibal parts around him and he's sliding, and slow, so slow, he has to make sure this is right.

His eyes are on Hannibal's, on the shape of his mouth, on the fine lines of his crow's feet and his forehead, watching for any slight twinge, any hint of discomfort. He finds nothing unwanted, and he keeps sliding, sliding more and deeper, steady and careful until there's nothing left to slide and he's entirely wrapped in Hannibal.

Everything's breathing then, shared breathing and eyes, and he doesn't want to blink and break it.

He's not moving, not yet. He's just being here with Hannibal, inside Hannibal. Conjoined.

"Hannibal..." He hesitates, suddenly aware of how rarely he addresses him by name, while Hannibal uses Will's all the time. It's always felt… intrusively personal to say it, when Hannibal's demeanour is so unfailingly professional.

Well, maybe not unfailingly. He seems distinctly less professional when he's on his knees, with his hair disarrayed by Will's fingers and his lips sucking on a pink condom.

The thought almost makes Will break down laughing, but he won't let himself. He wants to, he wants to laugh forever, because he doesn't think he's been this happy since he was a six-year-old at Christmas, but he won't laugh in this one, particular moment.

Hannibal's looking up at him with an endlessly patient curiosity. "Yes, Will?"

Will strokes one finger the length of Hannibal's cheek, curling along his jawline. "I want to see you. All of you." It only seems fair. Hannibal's seen everything of Will, seen him sick and hallucinating, seen him kill, and his response to it. Hannibal puts his physical self very much on display, but it seems like his entire surface is reflective.

Hannibal reaches up, mirroring Will's affectionate gesture. "You already have."

Will closes his eyes, a quick shake of his head. "It feels like there's something missing."

Hannibal cups his palm to Will's chin, his fingers spread wide across his cheek, and there are solid walls of certainty behind the diaphanous, swirling lust. "You've seen and understood every part of me, Will. There's nothing you don't already know. You need only put all of those pieces together."

'I don't wish to lie to you.'

Hannibal's words are the truth. It's not that Will believes him, Will *knows* it's the truth.

He still feels he's missing something, but Hannibal's compellingly detailed jigsaw puzzle is a challenge he can complete another day. Will's almost suspended, apart from time, like he could stay here until morning merges into afternoon, but they're not in their twenties and Hannibal probably has a time limit in this position with the stress on his hips.

He pulls back from the heat, from the press of Hannibal all around him, almost his full length exposed before he pushes his way back in.

Hannibal's not as hard as he was, but that doesn't mean anything. Will reads from the delicate tracery of his features, the set and shivers of his muscles, not the state of his erection, and everything he's reading is a river of pleasure and joy. Hannibal's body spreads easily to take him each time he slides inside, and Hannibal's mind is just as eager to feel him, to drink him in, accepting Will in every way.

This isn't only sex, this is… uninhibited mutuality.

He reaches for Hannibal's erection, sharing the rhythm of their movement through his hand, drawing back and surging forward with both his hips and his fingers. Feels Hannibal swell and firm again within his grasp, rising to his touch as Hannibal's pelvis presses up onto his cock. There's an easy physicality between them, a cadence that works for them both, and Will twists with his wrist and rubs his thumb over Hannibal's slick frenulum, tugging him into a ragged, harsher pattern of breath. Hannibal's smooth and tight around his cock, Hannibal's sleek and heavy within his hand, inside and outside, and they're both feeling it, the grip they have upon each other, the acknowledgement raw in Hannibal's unending stare.

Hannibal asked for this, he wants this experience with Will, and Will's going to make sure they experience the whole of it together.

He keeps his own rhythm slow, steadying the build, and works his hand on Hannibal to the depth of Hannibal's inhales, the breadth of his parted lips, the flutter of his lashes. He strokes and entices and plays fingers around the ridge of his cock, speeds the motion as Hannibal tightens, until he gasps and shudders and spurts thick streaks of come over Will's hand and his own skin.

Will drops the last of his walls and his head surges with the rush of Hannibal's euphoria, shimmering in a flood of dopamine and oxytocin and searing pleasure that aren't his own, and then his own brain kicks in response and they *are.* One more flex of hips and his own orgasm peaks, cascading through him as Hannibal spasms around him, and they're both trembling, both heaving, pressed into each other and sticky and sweaty and clinging in a limitless, eddying loop of sated lust.

There are long seconds when they're together, right where they ended, watching and panting, and then Hannibal strokes his fingers the length of Will's biceps, curling fast just above his elbow. "Would you tolerate a further delay to your breakfast and join me in the shower?"

Will smiles and glances down to where his hand's wrapped around the base of his cock, holding the condom. "Get the water warm for me, I'll be in when I've tidied up."

Hannibal unfolds his legs from Will, twisting first onto his side and then onto his feet alongside the bed with almost uncanny grace. Will would never have expected to find such effortless athleticism in a middle-aged psychiatrist – there's definitely a history there, no doubt one of the puzzle pieces Hannibal's expecting him to fit together for himself.

Will watches him stride away, alive with the anticipation of it, the thrill of when he'll finally shape all of Hannibal's compelling details into one unique whole.

It isn't quick or easy, sliding off a condom that's slick both inside and out, and he has to wait until he's softened somewhat before he can roll the length of it free. He ties off the end with the sound of water spattering onto tile loud from the next room, wraps it into a tissue from the box on the

nightstand and takes it to the garbage can in the corner. Wipes off his hands on another tissue and disposes of that one too.

The bathroom's already lush with accumulated steam, moisture condensing on the glass of the shower door, but not enough to obscure the vision of his lover, muscular and wet and shameless, hair clinging to the curve of his skull and straggling down over his eyes. Hannibal turns his face from the stream of water, his eyes opening to settle on Will in blatant desire and lazy satisfaction.

Will tugs the door wide and steps forward naked to join him.

The next day's Wednesday, and the evening finds him at Hannibal's office. The door opens as he walks into the waiting area, Hannibal holding a bottle of wine by the neck, already uncorked.

Will follows him inside, and Hannibal pours into the glasses set out on his desk with an elegant twist of his wrist, handing one to Will with a gentle smile.

There's no longer any pretence that this is a therapeutic session; there's only the two of them sharing space and wine and the ever-present tingle of mutual appreciation.

Will props his ass against the edge of the desk, staring down into the pale gold liquid, simpler than looking at Hannibal with what he has to say.

"Alana thinks we shouldn't meet here anymore. I'd planned to say something sooner, but we found the encephalitis and then I was in the hospital." And he spent yesterday thinking more about *having* Hannibal than about protecting Hannibal, his livelihood, his reputation; the guilt and selfishness crawl over him with a thousand sticky feet, ever-present through his confession.

He needs to do better.

Hannibal settles alongside him, their elbows touching. "Alana is very astute." He hesitates a moment, eyes slanted sideways at Will, before he pushes on. "I haven't recorded our meetings here in some time, but I could do so tonight, if you would be more comfortable."

Will likes the sense of privacy and ease he finds with Hannibal, but this isn't about him. "It might be for the best. Something to play in your defence, if you ever need to show I'm not here as your patient."

Alana's right; it won't help, not if someone's determined to use him as a tool against Hannibal, but Will finds he's oddly loathe to lose this time with Hannibal, the one spot in his weekly calendar that's inviolate, exclusively reserved for Will.

Hannibal sets down his glass and steps away from the desk, opening the drawer to take out a slim mp3 device. His thumb hovers over the record button, his free hand reaching for Will's wrist. "I

would have no objection to a regular Wednesday evening appointment with you for dinner at my house instead."

A few strands of Hannibal's hair have evaded their restraint, straggling over his forehead as he peers up at Will from beneath them. Warmth and hope seep from him, echoing within Will's mental corridors and strengthening with each reflection from those internal walls, because Will's not the only one holding onto this…

He curls his fingers to stroke against Hannibal's. "Maybe we could make it a weekly thing for Abigail too?" Their arrangements with Abigail have been piecemeal until now, dependent on a mixture of work and whims. Adding structure and predictability to her new relationships with them would benefit her almost as much as the scheduling at the hospital.

Hannibal presses the record button and lays the player on the desk. "Abigail very much enjoys interacting with your dogs, and animals have long been recognised as good therapy. Perhaps we should add both Wednesdays and Sundays to her schedule to begin with. Assuming Alana approves it, of course."

Will's smiling as he retrieves his hand, contact becoming a brushing touch as they part. "She will." Alana likes Hannibal too much to hold a grudge over his one indiscretion so many weeks ago, and she can see how much Abigail likes Hannibal too.

"I'll speak with her tomorrow." Hannibal takes a sip of his wine, eyes considering over the rim of the half-lowered glass. "Are you feeling fully restored after your illness, Will? Enough to consider discussing some FBI business?"

Will tilts his head, interest spiking immediate and sharp. "Jack gave you another case."

"While you were recovering, yes. I was reluctant to raise it with you until you seemed your normal self."

Hospital's never anything but dull, and though he appreciates a quiet day at home, too many of them leave him starved for mental stimulation. He gives Hannibal a fast, lop-sided grin. "I'm as normal as I'm ever going to get."

"As normal as I would wish you to be," Hannibal says, his lips stretching in a smile that's barely there and still a blaze of genuine delight. "Your uniqueness is a most welcome addition to the world." And Will can only smile back in the novelty of it, the ability to joke and tease when his oddities have chafed and itched beneath his skin his whole life.

"So, who are the victims?"

"Victim, singular," Hannibal corrects. "He was a trombonist with the Baltimore Metropolitan Orchestra."

Will pushes his tongue against the back of his teeth, wonders if Jack would have thought to check. "Did you know him?"

"Only by reputation," Hannibal says, and his easy calm attests to the lack of personal connection. "He was a relatively recent addition to the orchestra. He hadn't been involved in any of the fundraisers I've attended."

Will relaxes back against the desk and swallows another chilled, bone-dry mouthful from his glass. He doesn't know a lot about wine, but he knows this one's good. "What was his reputation?"

Hannibal taps one finger against the stem he holds, a slight motion of thought that brings no sound from the crystal. "As a person, somewhat undistinguished – many considered him a little retiring, but not in any way unpleasant. As a professional trombonist, he demonstrated borderline competence."

Will raises his eyebrows, a brief quirk of mouth. "Must be hard to find good brass players."

"Unfortunately, salaries in the orchestral world are rarely commensurate with the level of skill and training required to master an instrument. They attract only the truly dedicated or the mediocre."

"Perhaps someone was hoping for a more dedicated replacement."

"Perhaps." Hannibal's flat, single word agreement isn't agreement at all.

Will places the wine glass back on its desktop coaster – it's not a good idea to be holding anything fragile when he does this. His heart thuds a little heavier in his chest, anticipation rising metallic over this tongue. "Tell me."

He closes his eyes, sinking into sound, into the world woven by Hannibal's words; the symphony hall builds up around him in tiers of seating, the raised platform central to the staging. The seated body with his throat stretched and bared, exposed in every literal sense, an instrument of flesh and cartilage carved with skill and purpose.

When his eyes snap open again, his pulse is leaping in his wrists, his hands flexing with the urge to play.

This murder was as far from impulsive homicide as it's possible to be. This murder was planned meticulously, over weeks, maybe even months, every detail considered and reconsidered to ensure it would work exactly as anticipated. And when the moment came, when the long weeks of planning and preparation were finally executed, when the body was arranged and treated and played, the music resonating through the perfect soundspace of the concert hall, it was *ecstasy*, his spirit soaring upwards, shimmering into the rafters with the notes.

Hannibal is watching him, carefully unblinking. Watching Will with an intensity matching that of the killer.

Will swallows past his dry throat, swipes his tongue around to wet his lips. "The techniques applied to the body are somewhat niche."

Hannibal's eyes on Will haven't eased. "I believe we have a specialised pool of suspects."

Will tips his head, considering. "Theoretically anyone could look it up with a search engine, but it takes a certain base level of knowledge to know what to search for."

"Indeed." There's no change in Hannibal's expression, no hint to be found in his face.

Will inhales a long, sucking breath, lets it seep out slow past his lips. Dissects his thoughts from the lingering weight of sensation splayed all through his mind. "The murder wasn't about the victim, at least not entirely. The murder was about the display. The trombonist was literally an instrument for

the killer to make his statement." He feels himself live through the crafting of his instrument again, the procedure delicate and intricate. "He's killed before, more than once, but not like this. It's skilled, distinctive." His eyes shoot from his internal vision back to Hannibal. "He's not making himself hard to find, he's making it easy."

Hannibal takes another leisurely drink from his glass, but his attention's entirely on Will. "Who was he making his statement for?"

Will matches the action, the acid-fruit of the wine lingering over his tongue as he studies Hannibal in return. Hannibal's curious, yes, but his curiosity's not about the murder. "You already know."

"I have a working theory." Hannibal's not offended at being called out, his lips stretching and his eyes crinkling in the quick slide of amusement. "Before I divulge it, I would very much like to know if your conclusion is the same."

Will shakes his head, the absurdity of it almost making him laugh. Surgery, psychiatry, nobody excels at either without relentless self-confidence, and Hannibal's renowned as brilliant in both. "You trust your own judgement, you don't need anyone else's."

"I trust in both of us, Will. I find great comfort in knowing we're of the same mind." Hannibal's intensity radiates through the words, but there's a gentleness there too, a depth of care that won't easily be overcome.

It jolts through Will; it jolts every muscle and nerve and every foundation of his walls, because Hannibal's real in this – he doesn't just respect Will's opinion, it *matters* to him that they think the same way, that they see the same world.

He drops his eyes from the force of it, retreating into his wine glass and the lure of the golden liquid within. It's probably expensive, not meant to be gulped down inelegantly, a third of a pour at a time, but Will finds space in the simple action, calm in the full notes of the alcohol as he swallows.

Hannibal's had a couple of days to think all of this through. Will's trying to catch up in minutes.

He's always enjoyed a challenge.

This murder was about music, the body designed for the perfection of sound. "The killer could be speaking to a patron of the arts. Another musician." It's not wrong, exactly, but it still doesn't feel right. His fingers tap against the edge of the desk, the wood polished smooth and flawless, curved within his palm like the neck of a cello.

The instrument was created for appreciation, yes, by both player and audience, but the shape of the performance gives information as well as music. The murderer wants to be found, not caught; he wants to be found by someone he believes would enjoy finding him.

His hand tightens down upon the wood, his gaze swinging from the killer back to Hannibal. "Or another killer."

There's pleasure in Hannibal's eyes now, agreement and admiration. "That's my suspicion, yes."

"He's calling out to someone like him."

“It’s a serenade.”

Will raises his eyebrows and huffs out a quick laugh. “He wants them to make beautiful music together?”

“Beautiful music, beautiful murder.” Hannibal turns to face Will full on, his hand lifting to cup the angles of his cheek. “Even the anomalies of humanity want that, Will. Even those who believe it could never happen, not for them. Even those who’ve given up, those who despise the very concept – they still want it, even if the desire is buried so deeply they believe they’ve abandoned it.”

That knowledge, that resignation, it’s stalked Will through the last decade of his life. It’s tapped along behind him, the hoofbeats of a dark stag ringing on concrete, echoing through empty corridors, harsh and ever-present. He sees it mirrored in the stark lines of Hannibal’s face, and the hope flickering behind his eyes when they linger on Will.

He does the only thing he can. He lifts his own free hand to Hannibal and he closes those last few inches and he kisses him until the tap of hooves fades from his head and their pursuers fall into silence, until all their beasts are banished from the room.

Chapter 8

Dusk was hours ago, and the dogs are long settled by the fire, curled in their beds or on the thick warmth of the rugs, noses buried in tails. The whiskey glows a rich amber in his glass, hangs perfectly on the edge of sharp in his throat.

The knock on the door's a surprise, because he didn't hear a car, but somehow it's not – it almost feels like he's been waiting.

It's Hannibal, of course – who else would it be?

Will stands back to let him in. He's naked and gaunt, but Will doesn't mind which form he comes in.

Hannibal reaches out to wrap fingers over Will's shoulders, easing him back towards the bed in the corner of the room. They lie along the bedspread, and Will's bare too now, their antlers tangling as they press close, black skin moulded against black skin, shaping themselves to one another in the dancing light of the flames.

Hannibal's hand moves between them, sliding over Will's chest and then deeper, long, dark fingers curling through his skin and prying between his ribs, slipping inside his chest to cup around his heart.

He won't crush it, or bruise it, he only wants to hold it.

Hannibal's black, unblinking eyes stare into his own, waiting.

Will's own hand seeks out the gaps, finds the spaces left open for him, pushing gently past skin and bone to Hannibal's heart. He grasps it lightly, feels it beat powerfully against his fingers, once, twice, and then he wakes.

The clock says it's a little after one. He remembers going to bed; there'd been no knock on the door, and the dogs are undisturbed.

He rearranges his pillow beneath him and settles back into the softness of it.

He's still having weird dreams, almost two weeks after the hospital released him. He'd thought they might fade with the fever, but that was an unreasonable expectation. He's always had weird dreams, and these don't leave him exhausted in a tangle of sweat-soaked sheets. They leave him splayed beneath the blankets, rolling easily into a new shape to resume his sleep.

They're odd, but they're not distressing; they're just his dreams.

The weather's favourable on Sunday – cold with only a light breeze and mostly clear skies, the clouds scudding across the expanse of blue behind his house. The dogs sense his restlessness and sniff by the door, patrolling the boundaries and watching from the windows, tails half-raised in expectation. They know the quiet purr of the Bentley over the crunching gravel, and they rush to the door with an eager excitement that floods Will just as rapidly.

There's no reserve left on either side, Abigail sliding from the leather seat and greeting Will with as much enthusiasm as she does the dogs, a quick, genuine hug with both of them clinging to each other. Hannibal's watching them as he locks the car, a city habit that's not needed here, and Will finds his eyes and his smile beyond Abigail's hair.

There are snow patches lingering by the bushes where the drifts had piled up last week, and the dogs hurl themselves in with abandon, glittering cascades sent flying through the sunlight as Zoe and Buster practically disappear into the banks. Abigail rolls the snow into loose balls and tosses them, chased enthusiastically by a sea of hair and tails, the snow disintegrating as soon as they're caught.

When they come back inside and peel off their coats, Will notices there's no decorative scarf tied above the collar of her sweater. The scar along her neck has thinned and faded, but it's still obvious at a glance. She just doesn't feel the need to hide it from them anymore.

There's a change from hot chocolate this afternoon – instead Hannibal's rattling in the kitchen produces mugs of a rich herbal tea with rosehips and lemon, alongside the tub of cookies he brought with him.

"They're amaretti," Hannibal corrects instantly. "This is my personal variation on the traditional recipe from Saronno, in Italy." His expression paints him a stern lecturer of failing students, but his eyes are infinitely warm as he looks between them. "I also added a little Amaretto liqueur rather than almond essence. I'd appreciate it if you didn't mention that last part to Doctor Bloom, I wouldn't like to see her vexed with me again."

"I promise," Abigail smiles, and she takes a bite of one of her cookies – amaretti – a faint trail of powdered sugar dusting down onto the wool of her sweater.

The house is mellow and light and filled with chatter, and Will's thinking maybe this is how his home is supposed to be. It's always been safe and calming, and with the dogs it's even been welcoming, but it's never been… joyful.

They relax and eat and drink and talk, and the amaretti don't linger for long. Hannibal takes their mugs and plates back to the kitchen, and as soon as the crockery's gone, Zoe takes the opportunity to leap up onto Abigail's lap, winding herself into a nose-to-tail ball while Abigail rubs her ears.

Hannibal doesn't sit fully back into his chair when he's done. He perches upright on its edge and turns to Will, his gaze lightly questioning.

Will nods, and Hannibal reaches across the narrow space between them, enfolding his fingers with his own. "Abigail, Will and I have something we'd like to tell you. It's likely that you've observed some small differences between us already, but we feel it's the appropriate time to let you know that Will and I have embarked upon a more personal level of our relationship."

Her gaze shifts back and forth between them, no stiffness in her frame, no innate rejection. "Yeah, I noticed." She dips her head and her smile hovers around her lips, butterfly-weak and erratic. "You

look… happy."

There was always some risk Abigail would find this hard – that seeing them together would remind her of what she'd lost, of the many years of home-cooked dinners with her parents – but it would be easier than the loss of trust if too much time passed and she felt they were hiding this from her. "This is still kind of new for us, Abigail." Will glances down to where their fingers lie entwined on his thigh, before he drags his gaze back to the uncertain girl nestled in his chair. "You have to understand, there aren't any guarantees."

Her mouth twists and her eyes flick away, blinking into the light from the windows. "Nothing's ever really guaranteed, is it?"

"No, not in this world," Hannibal says softly. "Some of our choices we make, and some of our choices are made for us." He carefully untangles his hand from Will's, crossing the room to stand beside her chair and lay a soft touch on her quivering shoulder. "When choices are made for us, the important thing is how we react to our circumstances. Perhaps what matters most is the people in our lives we choose to trust."

She hunches forward with an audible rush of breath, and a tear drips from her eye, a slow, shining trail along her cheek.

It's a giant wall of bricks shaking apart in an earthquake, falling onto Will in a crushing mass and leaving in its wake the empty, gaping space of her abject misery. The force of it sucks the air from the room and from his lungs, his hand clenching into the fabric of his pants, clawing into the muscle of his thigh beneath. He feels pressed into his chair, locked in place, and utterly unequipped to respond.

His empathy gives him understanding, but he has no experience dealing with crying teenagers.

Her arms are a circle around Zoe, her hair falling in a curtain over the dog. "Hannibal said we didn't need to keep secrets from each other. When he said I should tell you about Nick Boyle, he said you'd understand, that you'd protect us."

"He was right," Will says, because she'll always need that confirmation. "I did understand, and I'll always protect you."

"Not all secrets are bad, Abigail," Hannibal says gently, "but they are if they hurt you, if keeping them becomes an intolerable burden. A secret that is hard to admit even to yourself may seem less terrible when it is shared and accepted by those around you."

There's a silence, a moment that hangs immobile before she breaks it.

"I helped him." It's a sniffle and a whisper breathed into Zoe's fur.

"I can't hear you," Hannibal says.

"I helped him." Her voice is stronger, still broken through her tears, but determined to speak out. "I knew what my father was, I knew what he did, I… Those girls, they wouldn't have trusted him, but they trusted me." Her eyes are fixed on her lap, each breath a gasp and a sob, and Zoe stirs to lick the tears from her cheek. "I talked to them, laughed with them. Girls who looked just like me, who could have been my friends." Her voice falters and shatters, her slight frame racked by a shiver, her fingers curled in Zoe's fur. "I couldn't say no, I couldn't, I... I knew, it was them or me."

Hannibal sits gently on the wide arm of her chair and opens his arms. She folds herself into him, Zoe leaping away as she moves; her shoulders are hunched and shaking, and Hannibal wraps her into his security, hands around her back and stroking the length of her hair. “I wondered when you would tell us.”

He’s comforting Abigail, but he’s watching Will above the soft wool of her sweater. “There’s nothing of yourself you can show us that we won’t embrace.”

Hannibal isn’t shocked. He’s not even surprised, and Will isn’t either. Not really.

He’d hoped that Abigail was innocent of this, but after he learned about Nick Boyle, his hope had become more of a stubborn, desperate clinging.

Determination floods from Hannibal as he embraces her, the steel force of his will set in his features, and that same certainty is already coiled in Will’s gut.

Neither of them will be telling Jack about this.

Abigail’s forehead is pressed into Hannibal’s chest as she sobs and shivers against him, her face and her voice sodden with tears. “I’m a monster.” Hannibal holds her and soothes her, uncaring of the effect she’s having on his clothes, and the sucking, clinging void of her despair is swamped beneath the surge of that love, Hannibal’s and Will’s own, both of them sharing it together.

Will drops to his knees beside the chair, one hand reaching for Abigail’s, the other wrapped around Hannibal’s calf, and he smiles up at her from beneath her tangle of hair. “We know what monsters are, Abigail, and you’re not a monster. You’re a victim.”

She’s weeping and sniffing into Hannibal, and her fingers clamp down around Will’s, clutching for him, needing him. It’s a force almost as overwhelming as her grief, and he braces under the weight of it, matching the strength of her grip.

Hannibal tilts his head, his cheek pressed to Abigail’s hair. “You did what you needed to protect yourself, Abigail, there’s nothing to be ashamed of in that.” His eyes find Will’s over her shoulder, as steady and sure as his voice. “Your life is precious, and Will and I are very glad that you kept yourself safe.”

It’s true. Horrible in some ways, in many ways, but it’s undeniably true. Abigail being here is so much more important than the fact that those other girls are dead.

Her breathing quietens and evens out, and she sits back from Hannibal far enough to look him in the eye. Her face is red and streaked, but her shoulders have stilled. “Do you think my mom knew? About my dad? Do you think she guessed?”

Will’s fingers tighten on Hannibal’s leg; this might not be something she wants to talk about, but she needs honesty from them, especially now. He gives her fingers a brief squeeze. “Did your dad ever hurt your mom, Abigail? Did he hit her or scare her at all?”

“No, never. He would never, he loved my mom, he – “ She breaks off as the incongruity hits her, the care and the non-violence until the moment he grabbed a knife and killed her in a single, smooth motion.

Hannibal reaches up to push a loose strand of hair back behind her ear, leaves his fingers there, light on her cheek. “Then I don’t believe she realised who your father was. If she’d suspected, she would have taken you and left. The only reason to stay would have been out of fear.”

It’s the truth, as far as it stands. They can never know what Louise Hobbs really thought or believed, but this interpretation leaves Abigail with at least her mother’s memory untarnished.

“Abigail, have you discussed what you knew with anyone else?” Hannibal asks. “Someone in your therapy group, perhaps?”

Her eyes narrow, her mouth twisting down. “No, no, I could never tell them, they already think I’m a freak, all of them.”

“That’s good, Abigail. Discussions with your therapists should be confidential, but I’m not sure all of those girls would be so reliable.” Hannibal tilts his head and wraps his hand over both hers and Will’s. “I hope I don’t need to ask if this is something you plan to share with Ms Lounds.”

Abigail sniffs again and shakes her head vehemently. “She’d put it in the book. I need it to make people hate me less, not more.”

“I’m glad we’re all in agreement there, at least.” Hannibal smiles for Abigail, but his gaze drops down to Will. The book is something they’re definitely going to have to talk her out of. They can coach her well enough to get through one afternoon of police questioning over Nick Boyle, but there’s no way she’ll handle weeks of interviews with Freddie Lounds without falling over her story and contradicting herself. Freddie will suck the bloody truth from her with the ferocity of a vampire.

Hannibal opens his mouth to speak, hesitates, then begins again, slower and more cautious. “Perhaps we might avoid mentioning it to Doctor Bloom also, for now. Assuming you haven’t shared this with her already?”

She lifts her head, eyes huge and luminous with remnant tears. “She wouldn’t break a confidence… would she?”

He gives her a smile that isn’t meant to be convincing, the sadness creeping in around the edges. “I believe she never would, but therein lies much of the problem. Doctor Bloom is an idealist, who adheres to a rigid code of right and wrong. The grey areas of your life play no part in hers, Abigail. The choices that have been made for you, they would lead her to treat you differently.”

“She’d despise me,” Abigail says, bitterness spiking in her voice.

“She’d still like you,” Will says instantly. Hannibal’s known Alana for years longer than Will, but Will’s certain of that much. He also has memories of the reactions of his childhood psychiatrists to some of the less savoury thoughts he’d revealed to them. They’d all tried to hide it, but Will felt their distaste anyway. “She might find you a little harder to relate to, if she knew,” he says carefully.

Abigail needs support now, not dismay, however well masked. It probably is the right thing for her to keep some distance from Alana. Hannibal can give her the therapy she needs, despite his professed lack of experience – he’s doing great work with her so far, persuading her to open up when thankfully nobody else has.

“You can always tell us anything,” Hannibal says. “Will and I will only ever care for you and protect you, Abigail.”

She smiles, strained through the trembling of her lips, and she adds her other hand to the top of the pile.

Will goes with them in the Bentley for the drive back to Port Haven. It’s not convenient – they both have work the next day, and it leaves Will in Baltimore without a ride home, unless Hannibal makes another round trip – but Abigail needs ongoing reassurance, and the more of a united front they present, the easier it will be for her.

Abigail pulls them into a three-way hug outside the door, clinging to both of them with no signs of letting go. It’s an obvious delaying tactic, wanting to stay with those who know her secrets rather than walk into the building and be alone, trapped inside the lies, but she can’t stay, and neither can they.

“We’ll see you in just a few days, for dinner,” Hannibal tells her.

“I’ll come over and visit tomorrow after work,” Will adds. He should use that time to go over his students’ essays, but he knows too well how it is to be the outsider, the strange child watched with poorly-disguised suspicion; his own father had tried to help him build a bridge beyond it, but he’d worked long hours to make ends meet and he’d never really understood.

Will wants better for Abigail. He’s going to be there for her.

“Thanks, Will. That’ll be great.” She manages to muster up another smile for him before she walks inside, the door swinging shut behind her.

He sinks into the enfolding leather of the Bentley, his head tipped back against the rest. Lets the frosty evening air bite at him through the open door, sharp and tingling on his skin.

It’s exhausting, dealing with all that emotion battering at his shields for hours, sucking all his reserves to keep up the walls and maintain the balance between perception and drowning.

Hannibal slides into the driver’s seat, but he doesn’t start the car. “Will?”

Will summons up a fleeting smile. “I’m fine.” He’ll be okay, he just needs a few minutes to gather everything back together.

Hannibal studies him for another few moments, then fires up the engine.

Will closes his door and his eyes, lets the calm of this sealed space seep through him. He falls into the low, slow swell of music from the stereo, the seasoned vibrations of the cello strings, the

mellow wanderings of the clarinet. Absorbs the rumbling rhythm of the V8 as they pull away, the white noise of tyres on damp pavement, the quiet breath and movements of the man alongside him.

He relocates the sensations that are his own, distinct within himself, takes one more breath and opens his eyes. “Thanks.” He doesn’t have to explain more; Hannibal understands.

Hannibal’s gaze slides from the road onto Will. “I’ll strive to provide anything you need of me, Will. Everything I’ve said to Abigail about unconditional support and aid applies equally to you.”

“I know,” Will says softly, because he really does. Hannibal’s sincerity radiates from him with the gentle glow of a dwarf star and just as massive, but this isn’t the time Will wants to relive the emotional whiplash he’s only barely rid himself of.

He sits more upright in his seat, his fingers tracing the pattern of the stitching in the leather. “Have there been any more signposts from our musical killer?” He’s been curious all afternoon, but he wouldn’t ask with Abigail around.

“I’m not expecting any at this point.” Hannibal’s thumb taps lightly on the rim of the wheel. “He won’t be in a hurry. He’s laid out his trail of bread-crumbs, now he’ll allow some time for it to be followed.”

“I have a sneaking curiosity about what will happen if those two find one another,” Will admits. His gaze is locked on Hannibal’s profile, the precise lines of his jaw and nose, the bands of light and shadow chasing across his cheekbones as each streetlamp sweeps by. “Do you think they’ll declare themselves with a spectacular honeymoon murder spree? Or will they both fade back into the obscurity he previously enjoyed, before he crafted his message?”

The only reasonable answer is that they don’t know, they can’t know – without any information on the other killer, the one being sought by the musician, the nature of their interactions can’t rationally be speculated on.

Hannibal half-turns his head, giving Will a gentle smile. “There will be no meeting of like minds for him, Will. His serenade is doomed to fail.”

Will tilts his head, eyebrows lifting. “You sound impressively certain.”

Hannibal’s hand leaves the wheel to rest lightly on the fabric stretched tight over Will’s thigh. “Of course I am, because we will find him.”

It’s breath-taking, Hannibal’s confidence. Confidence not only in himself but in *Will*, in the way their minds connect, their thoughts twining together to provide insight that neither would have reached alone, or at least not so quickly.

Nobody has ever placed that kind of faith in him.

Hannibal’s fingers stroke once along Will’s leg, before returning to rest. “Do you wish to stay at my house tonight, Will?”

The logistics are possible, not practical, though at this point nothing is. “It will mean an early start, for me to take the train to Quantico.” He can ask Alana to stop by and let the dogs out in the morning.

“I don’t mind.” Hannibal’s voice softens and lowers. “I can drive you to the station. It will be worth it to have you with me.”

His eyes are shadowed in the dim light of the car, his face still in the minimal glow of the dash, yet Will can almost touch the waves of solitude and ache and hope, and he takes Hannibal’s hand within his own.

They both want it, to be together, to share touch after so much emotion, so they do.

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He visits Abigail the next day, as he promised. They can't talk about her problems in the hospital, too much risk of being overheard, but that doesn't matter. What matters is that he's there, sticking by her after her revelation, treating her with love and care and respect.

Tuesday night he insists on staying home, buckled down with his backlog of student papers, the dogs piled around his feet while he sips at the one glass of whiskey he allows himself when he's working. With everything else that's been changing over the past few months, it's almost good to have something so routine to get back to, this one aspect of his life that's been the same for years. The changes have been good ones, on the whole, but there's still only so much upheaval he wants to deal with at a time.

On Wednesday, all three of them have dinner at Hannibal's house, the start of their new weekly routine. They let Abigail steer the conversation, and she keeps it light. Avoidance can only be temporary – she'll need to talk through her issues with family and fear and coercion eventually – but it's understandable that she doesn't want another emotionally fraught conversation in just a few days. She wants to be comfortable and happy right now, and it's okay to let her indulge in it.

Will watches Hannibal sip delicately at thick spoonfuls of rabbit stew across the table from him, and he's captivated by every precise, careful movement. He hasn't seen Hannibal since early Monday, more than forty-eight hours ago.

It's been a couple of days, that's all, and he's already missed him.

He's sitting in this dining room, surrounded by Hannibal's expensive things in a situation where he felt profoundly out of place only a couple of months ago, and now it's innately natural. Soothing.

It feels like being at home.

His eyes travel between Hannibal and Abigail, and being here like this makes him want to smile.

They drop Abigail at Port Haven, and then they go back to Hannibal's house. The sex is intense and clinging, kissing and caressing. It might almost feel like making love, if Will had anything to judge that by.

Before he leaves, Will agrees to join Hannibal again for dinner the next day.

Hannibal brushes a kiss over Will's lips at the door. "Come early. I hope to have something very special for us," he says, and he touches their foreheads together, the pressure light and sustaining.

Will checks himself over again when he gets to the door.

He's not sure what Hannibal's idea of 'special' might involve, since nothing he's connected with ever falls under the umbrella of mundane. He didn't really want to dress differently, because Hannibal's stressed so many times the importance of Will being himself, but he's second guessing that choice now.

He pulls his eyes back up from his simple pants and jacket – it's too late anyway, he didn't bring any alternatives with him – takes his key from his pocket and lets himself in.

Hannibal hears him, of course, and meets him in the hallway. He gives Will a brief, light kiss instead of the more enthusiastic version – some part of the food must be at a critical stage.

Hannibal smiles into his eyes, calm and welcoming. "Come with me, there's someone I'd like you to meet."

They're not alone? Will had been imaging a leisurely, private dinner with slow, lingering sex after last night's meal with Abigail. He follows Hannibal through the door into his entertainment space – Will hesitates to call it a living room, because it's enormous and rigorously formal rather than homely – where an elegantly dressed man looks up from his position bent over the harpsichord.

"Will, this is Tobias Budge. Tobias owns a string shop here in Baltimore, I've asked him to restring my harpsichord."

A string shop? Will's exerting every bit of his police training to suppress his reaction, but he's not sure he succeeds. The man's a murder suspect by definition, what the fuck is he doing in Hannibal's house?

"Tobias, this is my friend, Will Graham. Will works for the FBI."

Budge hadn't shown anything beyond the vaguest passing interest in Will, more involved in his work, but now his eyes sharpen and he stands up fully. He's tall, taller than Hannibal, and he holds out his hand politely. "I'm very pleased to meet you, Mister Graham." His voice is as smooth as his manners and his dress.

Will takes the offered hand, and the opportunity to study the man. His grip is firm, but not oppressive – he's not turning this into a dick-waving contest – and his eyes assess Will coolly, running over his clothes and back to his face. Will's being measured just as thoroughly as he's absorbing Budge, both of them bugs in a jar beneath a magnifying glass, and everything about Budge is tempered and controlled, sealed deliberately away.

"Would you like a drink while you work, Tobias? Tea or coffee?"

Budge's gaze flashes instantly to Hannibal. "Tea would be lovely," he says, and there's a smile on his closed lips.

Will releases the handshake and steps away, just once, nothing dramatic but putting a little more distance between them.

"Would you join me in the kitchen, Will? I could use your assistance."

Will risks a glance at Hannibal, then he's right back watching Budge. He doesn't want to turn his back on a murderer (he's sure of it, everything about Budge screams psychopath, too many coincidences here for it not be real), but maybe if he and Hannibal get to the kitchen, he'll tell him what the fuck is going on.

Hannibal turns, walking back towards the door and the hallway, and Will takes a swift, sidling step to follow.

"Thank you for the gift, Doctor." There's the faintest sense of noise, of movement behind him, and Will raises his arm right before the wire loops over his head and around his throat.

The pain burns into the skin and muscle of his forearm, a searing line dragging down towards the bone. Budge is pressed up behind him, a wall of muscle along his body, and Will twists and braces his legs and shoves *back*. Budge's expensive shoes don't grip on the polished floor as well as Will's more practical choice, and he heaves them off balance to stagger sideways into the massive, carved armoire against the wall.

The wire slackens, but it's not enough, and Hannibal's there, grabbing Budge's face and slamming his head into the woodwork. And then it loosens more, and Will wriggles down and away, out of the lethal bind.

He puts distance between himself and Budge and Hannibal's done the same, taking two steps back closer to the door. Hannibal's lips are bared and twisted, his whole face contorted. "Will is not the gift." Icy rage in every slow, bitten off word, his accent thick with hatred, and Budge and Hannibal are talking about gifts and –

The serenade, the offer of a mutual song, it was played for *Hannibal.*

The shock on Budge's face has already contracted into resolve, a trickle of blood running from his temple as his gaze flicks between Will and Hannibal before settling on the latter, because he reads the psychiatrist more of a threat than the law enforcement professional and –

Budge has the wire held by one end now, whipping it around, angling it out viciously towards Hannibal. Hannibal backs up further, dodges left and then down, but he's in the barest section of the room, nothing to use as a barrier, and the wire coils onto his wrist, slicing through his shirt. Budge yanks viciously on the weapon and blood spreads through the cotton, a brilliant red stain against the white, and Will turns to the desk behind him, there has to be something among all this *stuff*, and he grabs a polished, spiralling antelope horn from a display stand. He rushes in, stabbing it towards Budge's chest, but he twists and takes it in the biceps instead.

It's enough to make Budge lose his grip on the wire, and it drops to the floor, still trailing from Hannibal's wrist. Budge makes a grab for the horn stuck in his arm instead, wrestling Will for control of it, then Budge's foot comes up and around and he kicks Will hard in the gut. Will

staggers back, breathless, losing hold of the weapon, and Budge has his back to the armoire, jabbing at the air with the antelope horn, keeping both of them at bay.

Will risks a glance at Hannibal while he heaves air back into his lungs – his peripheral vision will let him know if Budge attacks. He finds his eyes for the barest moment, and Hannibal's going to –

Hannibal lunges at Budge, not reckless but controlled, dodging the first stab and getting inside it, pushing the weapon hand away. Budge punches for his throat and Hannibal ducks, sweeping his leg around to kick his feet from under him and both of them plummet to the floor. Budge still has his grip on the horn and he makes another stab, but Hannibal's already rolling away and he escapes with a thin slice along his back, another narrow strip of seeping crimson marring his shirt.

It's more than enough – Budge is on the ground now and he's not getting up again, because Will stamps down on the wrist holding the antelope horn, the bone cracking beneath his heel. Budge shrieks, drawn out and guttural as his fingers spasm, the weapon falling away to roll beneath the armoire, and Will drops to his knees, straddling his chest to pin him. Budge grabs at Will's throat with his left hand, and Will punches up beneath his chin, snapping his head back and to the side.

The grip on his throat shifts and loosens, and he lashes out again, his sliced forearm stinging and his fingers aching, and Budge grunts and squirms and the hand on Will's neck slackens with each blow, and he's hitting him and hitting him with alternating fists until Budge's arm falls away to flop across the marble.

He could stop, he could restrain him; he could stop and he doesn't want to. Budge tried to kill him and he hurt Hannibal and he doesn't want to *stop*, doesn't want to lose the feel of flesh and bone beneath his hands, feeling it shatter and burst, he doesn't *ever* want to stop; he wants to keep on hitting and knowing and feeling *all* of it, more than he's ever felt anything, the power and the satisfaction and the greed of it surging through him with every punch, every wet, slapping crunch of it, and –

"Will." Hannibal's voice is low and calm and Will turns to look at him.

There's something in his eyes, something dizzying and beautiful, and Will sees himself reflected there; realises just how hard he's panting, feels the ache in his fingers and his muscles, the burn in his muscle where the wire bit deep. He looks back down at Budge, into the fixed blackness of his pupils, and there's nothing there. Not anymore.

He sits fully upright over the corpse.

Hannibal rolls the spiral horn out from under the armoire, kneels beside Will and shoves it between Budge's unmoving ribs, deep into his chest, then withdraws it. He presses fast and brutal on Budge's sternum, again and again, ignoring the crack of bone, forcing the dead heart to pump blood until it seeps out of the wound he made.

Will knows why. Beating a man to death looks… brutal. Vicious. Excessive. A fatal stab wound inflicted to end a desperate, drawn-out fight offers a clear-cut case of self-defence.

Will breathes again, steady and even, and gathers his muscles to pull himself to his feet. The taste of killing hovers over his tongue, the heavy scent of blood, the metallic bite of excitement.

There's movement at the edge of his sight, and Elliot Buddish is standing over by the wall, between the armoire and the door. He's not a winged, mythical creature, radiating majesty and power. He's

only a man. A man who made a choice.

He gazes at Will, unblinking. He doesn't speak. He doesn't need to.

Will looks down at the bloodied corpse sprawled over the marble floor, at what he's done. At what they've done, because they did this together. *Something special.*

There's no revulsion; there never could be. There's the shuddering elation of it, that blazing sense of righteousness and power, the same rush he felt after Hobbs, only this time he's ready for it, ready for the heat of it throbbing beneath his skin. He's not shocked or scared by it; he expects and absorbs it, and he's far from alone.

Hannibal.

Hannibal, who's standing splattered in blood, his own and Budge's, watching Will curiously, intently. Panting lightly from the exertion alone, no pupil dilation or other physiological markers of stress. Hannibal who fights easily, efficiently, ruthlessly, and who hasn't spared another glance at the body on his floor since staging the lethal blow.

"You've seen and understood every part of me, Will. There's nothing you don't already know. You need only put all of those pieces together."

There's no revelation, there's only knowledge settling into place, the satisfying click of the last shape of a jigsaw slotting into the whole. *"I think he would dislike reacting in a predictable manner."*

He'd known what the picture must be before this, but it takes that last piece to be able to actually see it, every detail laid out before him.

Hannibal made a choice once, protecting Abigail over the law. Later, Will made the same choice for both of them.

Nothing that's happened since has made him change his mind. Hannibal and Abigail aren't optional in his life.

Hannibal's staring at Will in the aftermath of killing, and he sees nothing in him to fix.

Will steps forward, touches a hand to Hannibal's jaw and kisses him lightly, mindful of the blood spotted along his cheek. "We can't dispose of this one. People could have seen him when he arrived – he might have your name in an appointment schedule at his store. I'll call it in and we can make sure our stories match before they get here." It's an easy tale to tell. Will killed him to defend them both, then Hannibal attempted CPR before the ambulance came. The only part that needs some finesse is why Budge was here in the first place.

He's turning away and reaching for the phone in his pocket, but Hannibal stays him with a hand on his arm. "Will…"

Hannibal's eyes shine in the light from the windows, warm and honey-golden, and now there's something close to shock in the stillness of his face, or maybe it's more like awe.

Will can only smile at him, and give him another quick, brushing kiss. "I've got this," he says and he takes out his phone, sliding through the contacts until he finds Jack.

There’ll have to be a deeper conversation at some point, about boundaries and safety and attention-seeking displays. And another chat leading to a clean-up of his own house, because Hannibal trusted him enough to show him this and offer him a shared reality, but he would have been insane not to take precautions in case Will made a different choice. There’ll be evidence of who the hell knows what secreted in all kinds of weird places, in case it was needed.

He hopes Hannibal didn’t get too creative. Some furnishings are damn near impossible to forensically scrub.

In this moment, though, he’s in charge of their security, and the only surprise in it is how not surprised he is, and how entirely at ease he feels.

He lifts the phone to his ear, and for a moment he sees Elliot Buddish suspended from the rafters of the office, eyes closed, his face serene, a self-made angel at peace with his decision. It’s a calm that Will now fully shares.

He’s stopped fighting the inevitable. He has only one choice left, and he’ll embrace it with everything he is.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for sticking with me to the end!

If you happened to enjoy this fic enough to want to tell other people, there's a tumblr post here that you can reblog :-)

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!